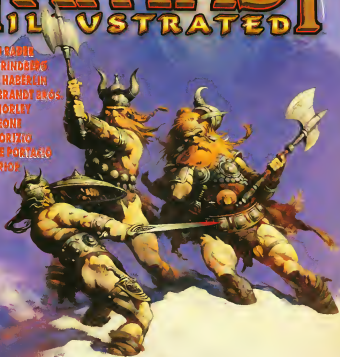


Illustrated Fantasy & Sci-Fi From The World's Greatest Artists & Writers

# FRANK FRAZETTA FANTASY ILLUSTRATED

DAREN RADEN  
TOM GRINDBERG  
BRIAN HABERLIN  
HILDEBRANDT BROS.  
ALEX HORLEY  
ELIO LEONE  
DANY ORIZIO  
WHILCE PORTACIO  
ROB PRIOR



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## A Letter From The Publishers

Hope everyone enjoyed reading the first four issues of FFI! as much as we enjoyed producing them. We've changed to a bimonthly production schedule giving you more of a chance to see your favorite artists and writers. The covers of the six issues of 1999 feature some of the best pieces from the incomparable body of work that is the Frazetta collection.

Now to the issue at hand...or in hand that is. The January issue features an extensive array of talented artists and writers. Avalon Studios' Brian Hoberlin and Wilcox Portacio combine their talents to debut an all-new original creation: *The Ulysses* - somewhat of a modern day Frankenstein. This issue also features the next installment of the wild Hildebrandt Brothers' creation *The Emerald Seven* and the next segments of the outrageous Infernus Terra and the mysterious Spooljacks. Painter Daron Bader concludes his portrayal of a primitive alien world that debuted in the previous issue and Rob Frier contributes a bone-chilling horror short story titled *Sleechy Man*. In addition, writer R.A. Salvatore provides a sneak peek of his upcoming novel *The Demon Apocalypse*.

Our next issue will be on sale in March and once again Brian Hoberlin and Wilcox Portacio will debut an Avalon creation. Their next story takes the traditional genie legend and adds a dark new twist. This segment will debut the characters which will be launched in a regular series by Avalon Studios next fall. Also in issue number six, artists Alex Horley/Dany Ozorio and writer Eliot Kane conclude the captivating saga *Infernus Terra* and The Brothers Hildebrandt wrap up *The Emerald Seven* in dramatic fashion. We're proud to feature French-American comic artist Philip Xover for the second time as he contributes a fantasy tale based on Celtic legend while Italian artist Alberto Ponticelli provides a rollicking medieval adventure looking forward to it.

Thanks and keep reading!

## FRANK FRAZETTA FANTASY ILLUSTRATED

March 1999 • Volume 1, Number 5

Cover  
Frank Frazetta  
"The Snow Giants"

Publishers  
James Breibell  
Joe Kingsley

Art Director  
James Breibell

Advertising Manager  
Joe Kingsley

Graphic Design  
Rich Ponder  
David Artura

Additional Graphics/Letters  
Atomic Pharaoh

QUANTUM CAR ENTERTAINMENT  
PHONE (402) 399-1272 FAX (402) 599-0665

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# FRANK FRAZETTA'S "The Snow Giants"

Fire and ice. If any single theme could define Frank Frazetta's incomparable body of work, it is the perpetual contrast of opposites. Good and evil. Movement versus stasis. Heated passion and cold steel. Animal lust coiling civilized restraint. The heroic individual against a hostile world. Conflict, the basis of all drama, is at the heart of a Frazetta painting so the imagery fairly crackles off the canvas with electric intensity. Frazetta's paintings live. They live because the artist places the viewer at the apex of the dramatic arc with a forcefulness that is irresistible. This seduction breathes life into even the most fantastic worlds of sensuality and savagery. It's as if the artist's canvas provides a window into another universe and compels the viewer to gaze through the glass.

Nowhere is the theme more clearly—or literally—delineated than in *The Snow Giants*. The characters fiercely struggle through a polar landscape where the earth meets the sky. In this duel to the death across the roof of the world, a man alone battles the remorseless forces of a cold universe. The fight is dwarfed by a towering, ice-crustad peak which rises to brilliant clarity above the bloody scene. The aloofness of the mountain, far removed from the events in the foreground, effectively conveys the underlying melancholy of Robert E. Howard's darker Conan tales. The transient struggle between men and gods is rendered futile by the enduring, titanic immensity which surrounds them.

Frazetta's evocation of a mythic, pagan North is perfectly suited to Howard's nihilistic vision in which the only meaningful gesture in a doomful universe is the perseverance of indomitable will, resulting in the heroic triumph of the moment. Thus Conan will always fight to the death rather than yield. The howling wind and clamor of heathen arms are preferable to the nothingness of resignation. Howard's ragnarok is accessible through the portrayal of a prehistoric past imbued by Frazetta with convincing authenticity. The consistent depiction of scale mail, metal-bossed hide armor and horned helmets that, as Howard once wrote, "no civilized hand ever forged," appear as genuine artifacts of a lost culture and almost affirm the existence of the Hyborian Age. In the brawny physicality of the figures lies a reflection of the artist himself. Once a trained athlete, Frazetta intimately understands the complex interplay of muscle, bone and tendon and the possible stresses borne by wielding objects as awkward and weighty as swords and axes. Frazetta paints warriors. These warriors possess hardened physiques of dense musculature chiseled and carved through strenuous, crushing labor. This contrasts the unnatural, stock imagery seen so often of barbarian bodybuilders standing posed in vein-popping absurdity...every fiber simultaneously flexed to the max holding weaponry that serves only as props.



One of the things Frazetta has stressed about his art is the restraint employed in his portrayal of fantasy subjects. Many people think Frazetta paintings scream off the canvas—they don't. They roar or boil or purr with a quality that Frazetta has described as "painting with cool fire." *The Snow Giants* offers a perfect example of this tempered passion. Conan has just "half severed the neck" of his adversary, yet the canvas is not splattered in gore. Such a display would only detract from the painting's drama. The gruesome event is suggested rather than depicted—the crimsoned tip of the blue steel blade, a few spots of blood drizzled over flesh and snow, the extreme angle of the giant tottering like a felled tree, bent arm clamping a hand to his slashed throat. These elements conspire to lead to a conclusion all the more horrific for its gradual revelation.

Beyond the compelling imagery, Frazetta's command of composition further draws the viewer into his strange, alien world. While this is not the forum for a detailed technical analysis of what makes *The Snow Giants* work, suffice to say that an absolute understanding of composition is an element that sets Frazetta's work apart. The dynamism of the painting is no lucky happenstance, nor is it simply a matter of great drawing. It is, instead, a studied, methodical combination of triangles, blockers and sweeping circles all within the parameters of a subtle "X" that holds the eye and freezes the moment. Once immersed in the dramatic scene, the viewer may deduce the ensuing sequence of events. Conan has leaned to his left to counterbalance the momentum of his lethal backslash. His weight is concentrated over his left foot as he coils under his shield. He is ready to parry the descending axe which will leave the giant's left side exposed to the killing slash of the sword in its return stroke.

Even reduced to the size of a paperback cover, *The Snow Giants* loses none of its power. Those fortunate enough to remember the Lancer editions of Conan will never forget the first glimpse of Conan of Gimmeria on the racks. The blaze of the beards and braided locks across the icy depths of blue background, the starkness of the brandished axe heads and the ferocity of barbaric battle provided yet another glimpse into a world of fire and ice by the unrivaled master of fantasy art.

Charles Keegan  
Ferrell Snow

# ULYSSESS SQUARED

BRIAN WARELIN

WHILE PORTACIO

CHUD  
CHUD  
CHUD

INTERVIEW: 50,450  
BOUNDS: 100,000  
NO EFFECT ON  
INTENDED TARGET

WAS LIFE SUPPORT  
TERMINATED

HOW?

NO DEND FROM  
PERFECT SOLUTION,  
NO DEND FROM  
ALLOID LOSS

WAS THE SOLUTION

WILL KILLED AT  
95.67 SECONDS

THE ROOMS  
LIKE ALL THE  
OTHERS

AM I THE ONLY ONE  
LEFT ALIVE? WHAT THE  
HELL AM I DOING HERE?

LOOKS LIKE I  
SUCKERPUNKED  
FACTORY, BUT  
WHY NOT?

CHUD  
CHUD  
CHUD

CHUD  
CHUD  
CHUD



ALL  
FLYING

WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK  
ALL RESISTANCE AGAINST THERE'S  
A GUY OVER THERE WITHOUT  
A READY AND JUST FORCE  
OF A GUY OVER THERE

WHAT THE HELL  
DID THEY WANT  
IN THAT ZONE  
OUT THERE?

I DON'T WANT  
TO SEE HOW  
I GET A SOME  
WIND DOWN

BEH A DAMNED  
SHUTTLE PILOT  
NOT A PROBLEM

THREE DAYS AGO, LOW EARTH  
ORBIT, BLACK OPS SHUTTLE  
ON ONLY ONE IN HISTORY

WE  
PICKED HER UP  
COMING IN ON AN  
IN-ORBIT VECTOR  
YESTERDAY

THIS  
LOOKS FLAKY,  
LIKE A TON OF  
JUNKY COMING  
IN

ON  
A TON OF  
CANNON  
FOR A  
BOLT

VERY  
FLAKY

COM  
CONFIRMING  
FOR BY A OF  
COLLECT, GOOD  
LUCK

THANKS





OH  
LOOKS PESTY  
BUT I'LL  
OWN

DO YOU  
SEE ANY  
WATCHES OF  
COURTESY?



THAT'S A  
NEGATIVE  
BUT SOME OF  
THE SCENES  
TO BRING IT  
FROM AROUND  
7-11 AND  
WEAPON  
FIRE



NEGATIVE  
BLACK EAGLE TECH  
HERE SAY ITS ALL  
JUNKY THAT  
PUTTING AND  
THAT ANYTHING  
WE HAVE



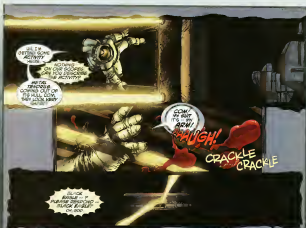
WELL  
YOU'VE GOT  
SOME  
FROM OUR  
SIDE OF THE  
FENCE



THAT'S  
AS WELL AS  
A  
BIG  
TECH  
DEFINELY  
ALIVE



AND  
YOU'VE  
GOT  
SOME  
AND  
WELL  
BEEN  
THAT'S  
ALL  
STAY





NAHHE. I'Z JUST  
GLAD MY EYES  
ILL JUST BOUNCE ON  
YOUR LIKE SOME  
BAD COIN.

DAD BOW. I  
CLOSE MY EYES  
AND THE BOWERS  
COME.

I CAN'T  
STOP  
FROM

FAST AND  
FURIOUS IT'S  
AFTER THE

CAN  
YOUR  
FROM

MAKE  
THEY  
FROM

HE IT CONTROLS MY  
THOUGHTS? TRYING  
TO SCARE ME OUTTA  
MY MIND -- I THINK IT  
DOESN'T HAVE TO BE  
IN A BLOOD THERE.

TWO THREETS  
ENTERED 2016

THAT THREAT  
IS A BLOOD  
EYES ALONE



CURTAIN  
AND FOUND ONE  
A ADVISORY?

CHUD  
CHUD  
CHUD

IT'S A GUNSHIP  
COPIED. WHAT  
ARE I THINKING?

I'M  
SURE.

STAY  
PUT AND WE'LL  
TAKEN YOU A  
MOMENT.

THAT'S  
GREAT.



SHOCK

WANT THE BOLT  
MY ARM?



— IT FEELS  
LIKE I'M  
TRAINING  
BODY

THE  
BODY

THREATS REQUIRED  
DEFENSIVE MODE  
ENGAGED

THAT VOICE... IT'S  
NOT COMING FROM  
OUT THERE... IT'S  
INSIDE MY BODY

IT'S CONTROLLING  
MY BODY... WAIT...  
BEHIND TO GO

NO!  
STOP!

IT'S A BRIDGE  
NECESSARY FOR  
JACK'S BRIDGE

TECHNOLOGY  
USED BLIND  
HELM

IT'S ALONG THEM  
TO BRIDGE... THEY'RE  
JUST FALLING DEEP

FUNCTIONS  
AT 0.5X

TECHNICAL  
TESTING

YOU WERE WARNED...  
I DID THIS... I DID THIS  
ALL... I DID THIS

Dave lived, deep  
in the wilderness.

WE KILLED THEM ALL.  
HE AND THE MEN WHO

I SEEM TO BE ABLE TO  
COMMUNICATE WITH IT ON  
SOME LEVEL, BUT ONE MAY  
ONE IN THE CONCRETE SEAT  
DON'T HAVE ANY SENSATION  
ABOUT WHICH THE BODY

TARGET  
REQUIRED

NOT HUMAN...  
ANYWAY, FROM  
WHAT I CAN TELL  
IT COMES FROM A  
MORE ADVANCED  
KIND OF MIND.  
OCCUPATION, MORE  
MORE ADVANCED

IT - THE ANSWER - CAN  
HOW TO MOVE, BEING ITS  
BATTLE LINE AND NEEDING  
ANY OF ITS WOUNDED  
WOUNDED, BRING THEM  
BACK, BRING TO FIGHT

IT GOT DAMAGED IN  
A LONG LONG FIGHT, AFTER  
BATTLE AND LOST ITS WAY  
IT WAS REACHING FOR  
ITS HOME WHEN IT FOUND  
US, AND I FOUND IT

SCANNING ME, IT  
COULD TELL I WAS  
ABOUT TO GO BACK  
FOR ONE OF THE  
WOUNDED, SO IT  
WOUNDED ME

NOW I HAVE TO STAY AWAY  
FROM PEOPLE, AT LEAST  
UNTIL I CAN CONTROL THE  
OTHER THING IN ME, AND I  
DON'T GET CONTROL BACK

WELL, IT'S NOT EVEN  
ON A LEVEL... IT'S JUST  
A DARK COMPUTER -  
PREDICTABLE TO  
PREDICT ITS NEXT  
BE BE DONE

BY ISOLATING WHERE I  
PROTECT MYSELF, NEVER  
KNOW WHEN SOMEONE FLOODS  
A BOMB, I GET IT DONE

TARGET  
TEXTURED

BUT IT DOESN'T  
DO MUCH FOR  
THE BOMBING  
IN A BOMB



# INFERNUS TERRA

WRITTEN BY GARY BASEMAN  
 DRAWN BY DAVE COOPER  
 INKED BY JIM MORROW

Issue 1

A LONG RIDE ACROSS A  
 BARREN PLAN UNDER THE  
 EARTH FOR THE FIRST TIME,  
 LORD YBOR'S ARMY HAS JUST  
 BEEN SOLEMNLY DEFEATED—  
 AND THE LAST LIVING  
 WARRIOR RETURNS HOME.

HEARING BAD NEWS CAN WEIGH  
 HEAVILY ON A MAN'S SHOULDERS



ESPECIALLY WHEN  
 THE RECIENT IS THE  
 RUTHLESS TYRANT  
 KNOWN AS LORD YBOR











LAVA BURSTS THROUGH  
THE HEART OF THE CITY.

STEEL AND IRON MELT AWAY  
IN SECONDS—LEAVING A  
PATH OF DESTRUCTION FOR  
AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE.

WHAT WAS  
IS NO MORE.



THE JOURNEY TO  
THE OUTER EARTH--

TO MODERN  
CIVILIZATION--

BURNS IN AN  
ANCIENT TUNNEL  
MANY LEAGUES  
BELOW THE  
EARTH'S OUTER  
SHELL.



AND ENDS IN THE  
MIDDLE OF OUR  
NATION'S CAPITAL.



HOW GRANT  
A WELCOMING  
COMMITTEE.

HOLD  
YOUR  
FURY!



I WISH  
TO SEE YOUR  
LEADER.

IF I HAD  
MY CHOICE TO  
SEND YOU RIGHT  
BACK DOWN TO  
HELL IN BODY  
SHIPS  
UNFORTUNATELY,  
THAT'S NOT MY  
CALL.

YOU WILL  
BE ASCENDED  
TO SEE THE  
COMMANDER  
IN CHIEF.



INTERESTING  
ARCHITECTURE.

I MIGHT  
ENJOY TAKING  
UP RESIDENCE  
HERE.



DO YOU SEE  
THE FELLA WHO'S  
CAUSING ALL THIS  
TROUBLE-EE?

THAT  
WAS  
HIM.

I AM  
RESPONSIBLE FOR  
THE DESTRUCTION OF  
YOUR CITIES. IF THAT  
IS WHAT YOU  
MEAN.  
ASSEMBLE  
THE REST OF THIS  
WORLD'S LEADERS  
AT ONCE.



I'LL ASSEMBLE  
THE WORLD'S LEADERS  
ALL RIGHT, AND DON'T  
THINK YOU'VE BEEN  
UNEXPECTED.

EVER SINCE  
SAN FRANCISCO  
WE'VE BEEN WAITING  
FOR YOU TO SHOW  
UP. NOW LET'S  
CATCH A PLANE.









THE PRIMITIVE MEETS THE MODERN AS THE LAST BAND OF REBELS--

ACCOMPANIED BY THE FASTEST CRACK TEAM OF MILITARY PROFESSIONALS AVAILABLE FROM GLOVE--

PLAN THEIR FINAL ATTEMPT AT DESTROYING YODOR LAVA TUNNELS...THE KEY TO HIS POWER.

WE HAVE ONE CHANCE TO DEFEAT YODOR. THERE ARE FOUR REMAINING TUNNELS CAPABLE OF DESTROYING CITIES.

I KNOW THE TERRAIN. WE MUST DIVIDE OURSELVES INTO FOUR GROUPS AND DESTROY THE TUNNELS AT THE SAME TIME.

THIS MAP SHOWS OUR POSITION AND THE LOCATION OF ALL FOUR TUNNELS.

WE MUST USE YOUR EXPLOSIVES TO DESTROY EACH TUNNEL. CAN YOU MAKE THE FIRE EXPLODE AT WILL?

NO PROBLEM. IT'S THE BEST C-4 MANUFACTURED. I CAN SET EACH PACK WITH A DELAYED FUSE AS WELL AS AN EMERGENCY TRIP SWITCH.

WE WILL ATTACK THE FOUR TUNNELS AT THE SAME TIME. OUR WARRIORS WILL PROVIDE THE NECESSARY DISTRACTIONS. PLACE YOUR EXPLOSIVES ON EACH TUNNEL AND...  
DETONATE.  
LET'S DO IT.

MY APPREHENSION IS STARTING TO SURGE. I SHOULD HAVE BEEN A SOLDIER EARLIER IN LIFE. WANT TELL MY BRIDGE CLUB MEMBERS ABOUT THIS.





SUCCESSFUL





GROUP THREE...



FALLS...

Ker-Clunk



TOKYO IS LOST.



GROUP FOUR.



RAT-TAT  
TAT-TAT



MY GOD!  
THE EXPLOSIVES!  
I MUST CARRY ON  
THE MISSION!

IT'S  
WITHIN MY  
REACH!



NEXT ISSUE...  
THE CONCLUSION!

# The Emerald Seven

Part 3

Created and written by  
Greg Hillbrandt, Tim Hillbrandt  
and Greg Hillbrandt, Jr.  
Edited by Shira Harding

PREPARE  
TO SURFACE!

THE  
EYE PATCH  
IS  
AMAZING,  
CAPT!

FIRST YOU  
FIND THE  
TRIFORUM...  
NOW THIS!

WANT THERE'S  
A LOT OF  
MACHINES...

OLD...  
--STILL  
FUNCTIONING!

JEOPERS,  
I DON'T  
BELIEVE  
THIS!

THE  
HEADQUARTERS  
OF THE  
EMERALD  
SEVEN!

**KLANK**

WHERE'S  
THE FARMER  
REPAIR  
STATION?

**SPLASH**



CHICK, HEAD  
FOR THAT  
DOCK

I WAS ONLY  
FOUR, BUT I  
REMEMBER THIS  
LIKE YESTERDAY

YOU  
NEVER  
TOLD US  
EXACTLY  
WHAT  
HAPPENED,  
ADAM

MY PARENTS  
AND THE OTHER  
FIVE SCIENTISTS  
DISCOVERED THE  
TRIFORM!

THEN WE ALL  
LEFT THIS PLACE TO  
HIDE IT UNTIL THE  
ACTIVATION SITE  
WAS COMPLETE



ON THE  
WAY BACK,  
ENFORCERS  
ATTACKED  
OUR SHIP

MY PARENTS  
PUT ME INTO  
AN ESCAPE  
POD

IT WAS  
THE LAST I  
EVER SAW  
THEM

BUT I  
COULD HEAR  
THEIR SCREAMS  
AS THEY WERE  
TORTURED TO  
DEATH--

--REFUSING  
TO REVEAL  
THIS PLACE

THAT'S WHEN  
SAMSON FOUND  
ME ADRIET AND  
STARVING

HE SAVED  
MY LIFE

ALL I HAD  
WAS A POUCH WITH  
THIS EYE PATCH

MY FATHER  
PUT IT AROUND  
MY NECK

SAMSON  
TOOK ME HOME  
TO DOCK CITY  
AND PUT THE  
POUCH IN A  
CHEST

IT WAS  
FORGOTTEN



UNTIL I  
FOUND IT  
LAST WEEK!

THE EYE PATCH--  
A DETECTOR, A MAP MY  
FATHER LEFT TO GUIDE  
ME TO THE TRIFORUM  
AND HERE-- **HERE!**

YOUR FATHER  
WAS A GENIUS!

THIS THING DOESN'T WORK  
FOR ANYBODY  
BUT YOU?

I COULD  
~~NEVER~~  
HAVE FOUND THEM  
WITHOUT IT!

BZZMM

WHAT--??

IT'S  
ACTIVATED A PROJECTION  
OR SOMETHING!

DAUGHTER--

MY  
PARENTS!

IF YOU ARE  
VIEWING THIS YOU  
HAVE SURVIVED AND  
THE TRIFORUM IS  
IN YOUR HANDS

GUARD  
IT WELL!

IT CONTAINS THE  
ONE EMERALD OF  
POWER AND CANNOT  
BE REPRODUCED

IT WILL NEUTRALIZE  
THE POLLUTING QUANTUM  
AND PROVIDE A SAFE ENERGY  
ALTERNATIVE THAT WILL NOT  
DESTROY OUR WORLD!

BUT FIRST  
YOU MUST COMPLETE  
THE ACTIVATION  
SITE

A SHIP  
IS READY--  
FULLY  
EQUIPPED--

TAKE  
IT

NOW, THE  
FUTURE OF  
THE WORLD  
IS IN YOUR  
HANDS!

THE BRAIN  
MUST BE  
STOPPED!

DISOBEY ME,  
SLAVE!

KKRRZZAAM

BLACK SKULL—  
FINISH YOUR  
WORK!

AAARGH!

WE LEAVE  
IMMEDIATELY  
FOR DOCK  
CITY.

WHAT IS  
THE URGENCY,  
WISTRESS?

THE PIRATES  
HAVE THE  
TRIFORUM.

GATHER  
YOUR CREW.

AS YOU  
COMMAND!







I SAID-  
NO QUANTUM  
BLADE!

HOW AM  
I GONNA RUN  
MY SHIP?

YOU BASTARDS  
CONTROL THE  
FUEL!



NOBODY  
LEAVE DOCK  
CITY!

NOT UNTIL  
WE GET  
TRIFORUM!

GO BACK  
TO YOUR  
SHIP!

WE GONNA  
SEARCH  
YOU.

DAWN!



THEY'LL  
NEVER FIND  
YOUR HIDE  
PLACE, BOSS!

HANG ON!  
THERE'S NOTHIN'  
WE CAN DO  
ANYWAY-- NOT  
TILL NOVA GETS  
HERE!

SHEDD  
GO CHECK  
ON SAMSON.  
MADE SURE  
HE OKAY!



AAAAAAAAA

UH-OH!  
WHO THAT  
GOWIN'?





BLACK SKILL AT DOOR!

COME FOR YOU, SAMSON!

I'M NOT LEAVING MY PLACE!

BUT THEY KNOW YOU'RE ONE OF NOVA'S CREW!

BLAM BLAM CRASH

SURE, GET OUT!

EEK! EEEK!

IT'S SLEEPH! ORIAS HEM!



HE GET AWAY!

WELL, WE'VE GOT THIS ONE!

WHERE'S THE TRIFORM, YOU FAT LITTLE BASTARD?

CONSPIRATOR!



YOU GO TO HELL! LAGG!



KRAK

HANGS!

YES, MASTER!

BEFORE I'M DONE WITH YOU, YOU'LL BEG FOR DEATH!

TAKE HIM TO THE FORTRESS!

TEAR THIS PLACE APART!

THEN BURN IT TO THE GROUND!

CONTINUED



ENTER THE STANCE...

RESERVE THE ELEMENT OF  
SURPRISE; DO NOT BE  
FOUND OFF GUARD...

HAND TO HAND BATTLE IS  
ALSO A BATTLE OF WITS,  
AND STRATEGY IS A  
WORTHY RIVAL AGAINST  
BRUTE STRENGTH...

A CALM AND RESERVED  
APPROACH TO CONFLICT  
MAY SERVE WELL WHEN  
VIOLENCE HAS BECOME  
NECESSITY...

THERE IS NO HONOR IN LOSING,  
NOT EVEN LOSING WITH DIGNITY,  
FOR THIS CHANCE MAY NEVER  
COME AGAIN...

A SINGLE OPPORTUNITY  
TO BE FIRST...

AND ONLY ONE MAY ACQUIRE  
THE POSITION THAT RULES  
ABOVE THE OTHER...

ALL THAT REMAIN, ARE  
MERELY IN SUBJECTION...

# PRIDELANDS

- RIVAL TRIBES -

PART TWO  
"THE STANCE"

ART BY:  
**DAREN BADER**

STORY BY:  
**LANCE HUTTO**

CREATED BY  
**DAREN BADER**  
- LANCE HUTTO



IT HAS BEEN PROVEN TIME AND  
TIME AGAIN... **RECKLESS ACTS**  
ARE BORN IN TIMES OF HUNGER,  
PAIN, LONELINESS AND STRIFE.

ACTS AGAINST ONE'S  
OWN WILL... FOR IN TIMES OF  
DESPERATION, COMES  
POOR JUDGMENT.

ONE WILL TRY TO LIVE  
AND BREATHE AT ANY COST,  
IF HE IS NOT TAUGHT TO  
CONSIDER OTHER THINGS...

FOR IN ORDER TO LIVE, ONE MAY ACT  
IN A MISTAKE... ONE MAY BE FORCED TO  
TAKE ANOTHER LIFE... TO SURVIVE...

**NOW!**

TO LIVE WITHOUT  
COMPROMISE MAY  
SOMETIMES BE A  
FRUITLESS MEANS...



WITH VIOLENT FORCE  
AND BRUTAL IMPACT,  
THE INITIAL STRIKE  
IS FIERCE!

A BLOOD-SOAKED FRENZY...  
FUELED BY ADRENALIN RAGE.

THE KILL IS EASY...

WHEN THE PREY IS...

FROM THE SHADOWS THE AMBUSH COMES...  
THE TABOSNA USES DARKNESS AS AN  
ADVANTAGE DUE TO ITS LIMITED VISION...  
AN ADVANTAGE THAT HAS NOW BEEN USED  
AGAINST THEM BY THE MANTAKA!



UNUSPECTING!



SHREEEE  
EE  
EE  
EE  
EE  
EE  
EE



A DISTRACTION...  
AN OPPORTUNITY THAT  
OFFERS VULNERABILITY...

IN THIS FLEETING MOMENT,  
ALL THINGS CHANGE...

AS ALL EYES LOOK  
ON IN AMAZEMENT...

AND SEE THE  
UNTHINKABLE...

THE AIR FALLS SO  
THICK AND SILENT,  
WITH A DULL AND  
NUMBING VIBRATION.

MOVING IN SLOW MOTION...  
LIKE A VACUUM OF SHOCK,  
A GASPING FOR A BREATH  
THAT WILL NOT COME...

THE POUNDING OF BLOOD  
THROBING IN THE BRAIN.

YET, THE REALIZATION  
COMES CRASHING DOWN  
WITH SUCH DEVASTATION,  
THAT ALL ONE CAN DO...

IS SCREAM!



MIATAN  
NO!!!



GROWING NUMBERS  
JOIN THE ATTACK,  
FORCING THE MIGHTY  
TO THEIR KNEES...

CLAWS PIERCE THE  
SKIN, TEARING FLESH  
AND RIPPING MUSCLE  
CLEAN FROM BONE.



AS THE ADRENALINE  
BEGINS TO SUBSIDE,  
IT IS REPLACED BY  
THE RUSH OF PAIN...

A TABOGNAI LOOKS OVER NATAN, AS THE  
FIRST RAYS OF SUNLIGHT WARM THE INNER  
CAVE... BROKEN AND BEATEN, THE MIGHTY  
MANTAKAI WAITS THE FINAL ATTACK...



THE BEAST IS  
Distracted...



SHINES PAINFULLY INTO  
IT'S SENSITIVE EYES...

AND MOVES CLOSER TO  
EXAMINE THE SHIMMERING  
OBJECT WHICH ADORNES  
THE ENEMY'S NECK.

A GLINT OF  
BRIGHT SUNLIGHT...



BLINDING THE  
TABOGNAI...



ENRAGED AND  
STARTLED, THE  
TABOGNAI  
STEALS  
THE OBJECT  
AND FLEES





RIPPING THE SPEAR  
FROM HIS CHEST,  
WATAR PREPARES TO  
GIVE CHASE TO THE  
FLEEING ENEMY...



A HESITATION...

WHAT HAD  
HE DONE?

WHAT WAS HE  
GUILTY OF?



IT WAS NOT WHAT IT  
SEEMED TO BE...  
WOULD THEY BELIEVE  
IT WAS SELF-DEFENSE?

WOULD IT REALLY EVEN  
MATTER, IF THEY DID?



LEAD THEM,  
AS I HAVE  
SHOWN YOU...

HOW CAN I  
IF THEY WILL  
NOT TRUST ME  
MYLORD?

FIRST YOU...  
MUST TRUST  
YOURSELF...

THE WORDS SET ADRIFT  
ON THE BREEZE...

LIKE A LEAF UPON A WARM  
BLANKET OF SUMMER AIR...

AND SO FOLLOWS  
THE SPIRIT...



TRAITOR!  
FACE ME YOU  
COWARD!

THE GODS AND THE GREAT HUNTERS HAD  
CALLED HIS FRIEND HOME. YET, SOMEHOW,  
A PART OF HIM WOULD ALWAYS REMAIN...

BACK AWAY  
NATAN!

YOU INSULT  
THE TRIBE WITH  
YOUR ACTS OF MOURNING!  
YOU MEANT TO KILL SHAGGA  
AND YOU ARE THE CAUSE  
OF FAUGUA'S DEATH!

NATAN, HOW  
COULD YOU TURN  
ON A MEMBER OF  
THE TRIBE?

BANISH NEW  
BANKAUN!  
IT WAS IN COLD  
BLOOD!

WE ALL  
WITNESSED YOUR  
RETRIAL OF  
OUR LAW!

I DEFENDED  
MYSELF, NOTHING MORE!  
BESIDES... ONLY THE  
RULER OF THE TRIBE CAN  
BANISH ANOTHER... AND THE  
RULER IS...  
NONE.

I AM  
THE RULER  
OF THE TRIBE  
NOW!

IT IS THE  
ONLY CHOICE  
FOR THE  
TRIBE!

YOU CANNOT  
APPOINT  
YOURSELF  
BANKAUN!

I WILL!  
WHO WILL LEAD  
US OTHERWISE  
NATAN?  
YOU?

I WILL FIGHT TO  
PRESERVE OUR RACE  
AND TO PROTECT US  
EVEN FROM ONE OF  
OUR OWN!

YOU  
ARE A MURDERER!  
YOU WILL LEAVE THE  
TRIBE NATAN...  
TONIGHT!

THE TABOSNAJ USE WHAT LITTLE  
ELEMENT OF SURPRISE IS LEFT AND HURL  
THEMSELVES AT THE MANTAKAI...

A LONE SILHOUETTE PASSES HIGH ABOVE  
THE STRUGGLE BENEATH THE TREES...

BAKKAJIN GET TO  
HIGH GROUND!!!  
GET OUT OF THE  
SWAMP!!!

AMATAN PULLS A PIECE OF  
FLINT FROM HIS SATCHEL...

THEY'RE IN  
THE TREES.  
**RUN!!!**


THE TACTIC IS USED TO MASK  
AN ATTACKERS NUMBERS AND THE  
TABOSNAJ USE IT MASTERFULLY

AND THE TWENTY HUNTERS...  
FIND THAT THEY ARE THE PREY!

...AND GIVES LIFE  
TO A FLAME...

**SLASH!!!**

HE LETS THE  
BRIGHT PLASH  
FALL...



IT IS NOW BAKKALIN WHO LEADS THE TRIBE ON THE TWO DAY TREK INTO THE BADLANDS...

A BARREN WORLD, ALIVE WITH SULFUR, VOLCANIC ACTIVITY AND GEYSERS... WITH RIVERS OF OIL, TAR AND MAGMA CARVING THROUGH THE TERRAIN.



THE MANTAKAI COME TO A SHALLOW MARSH WITH AN ISLAND IN THE CENTER.

THIS IS THE PLACE I HAVE HEARD MATAN SPEAK OF LORD BAKKALIN...

"A DENSE GROVE OF STRANGE TREES, IN THE OIL-COVERED SWAMP." WAS HIS DESCRIPTION

THEN WE HAVE FOUND THE ENTRANCE TO THE ENEMIES DEN...

THE SUNLIGHT IS DIM THROUGH THE HAZE OF GAS AND FUMES EMANATING FROM THE SWAMP'S STAGNANT WATER.



AND TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE...

IN SPITE OF INADEQUATE VISIBILITY, THE MANTAKAI CONTINUE ONWARD. EYES STINGING AND IRRITATED BY THE FUMES AND TOXIC VAPORS...

THE SUN WAS SETTING RAPIDLY.



INSIDE THE THICK OVERGROWTH OF TREES,  
THE MANTAKU COME TO A CLEARING...

THERE WERE SIGNS OF INHABITANTS,  
YET ALL APPEARED TO BE QUIET...

WE JUST  
MIGHT BE IN LUCK...  
IT LOOKS AS THOUGH  
THE BEASTS HAVE  
GONE...

BUT  
THEY WILL  
RETURN...

THIS IS  
MOST DEFINITELY  
THE NEST? HE  
WILL WAIT HERE  
UNTIL...

SUDDENLY, A CHILL RUNS  
UP BACKAUN'S SPINE...

A CHILL THAT  
MAKES HIM UNEASY...

LIKE HE HAS TAKEN  
SOME UNSEEN BAIT

OR MORE CORRECTLY...

LIKE HE IS  
BEING WATCHED...

THE AIR BECAME COLD...  
BEYOND THE RIMS OF HARMATH.

BEYOND THE  
FUNERAL PYRE...

LIKE RAUGUA, NATAN  
NOW STANDS BEYOND THE  
CIRCLE OF THE TRIBE...

HELPLESSLY  
LOOKING ON...

BARKAUN'S WORDS  
RING OUT...

BURNING LIKE  
A BONFIRE OF  
THEIR OWN...

WORDS OF HONOR,  
LOYALTY AND PRIDE...

ALL THAT NATAN  
ONCE CALLED HIS OWN  
WAS GONE NOW...

GONE LIKE  
THAT BLANKET OF  
SUMMER AIR...

NATAN WATCHED, AS BARKAUN  
LED THE TRIBE IN THE DIRECTION  
OF THE BARREN WORLD...

IN SEARCH OF THE ENEMY...  
IN SEARCH OF REVENGE!

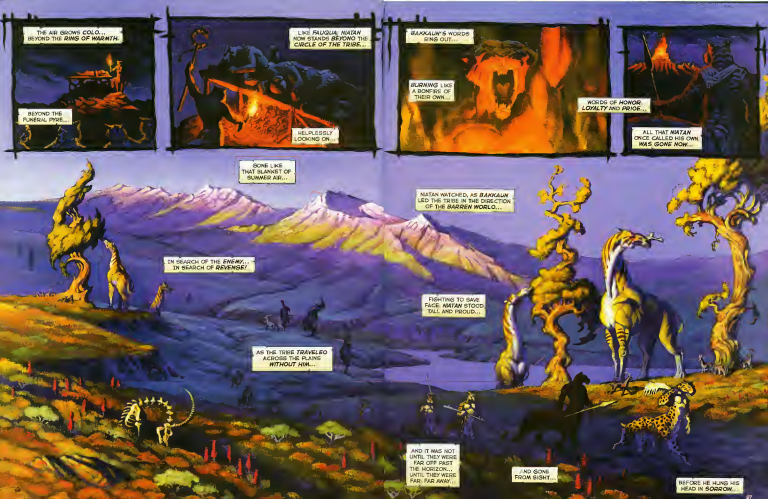
FIGHTING TO SAVE  
FACE, NATAN STOOD  
TALL AND PROUD...


AS THE TRIBE TRAVELED  
ACROSS THE PLAINS  
WITHOUT HIM...

AND IT WAS NOT  
UNTIL THEY WERE  
FAR OFF PAST  
THE HORIZON...  
UNTIL THEY WERE  
FAR, FAR AWAY...

AND GONE  
FROM SIGHT...

BEFORE HE HUNG HIS  
HEAD IN SORROW.





IT IGNITES THE THIN LAYER OF OIL  
ON THE SURFACE OF THE SWAMP...  
AND FLOODS THE REST WITH LIGHT

NATAN SURVEYS THE MELT AND  
CAREFULLY PICKS HIS TARGET...

WITH SPEAR IN HAND...

HE LEAPS FROM THE BRANCHES  
OF THE HIGH TREES TOPS...

AND WITH REVENGE DECIDING HIS PATH...



HE IMPALES  
THE LEADER!



NOW WITHOUT A LEADER,  
FRIGHTENED AND CONFUSED,  
THE TABOSNAI SCATTER.



MATAN REMOVES  
THE NECKLACE  
FROM THE DEAD  
TABOSNAI LEADER...



HE PLACES IT  
AROUND HIS NECK...

AND IS UNCHALLENGED  
IN HIS RIGHT TO WEAR IT.



ALL THINGS WRONG  
CAN BE MADE RIGHT  
AGAIN IN TIME...

THERE IS A RENEWING  
OF FAITH, AND A PLACE  
FOR REDEMPTION TO  
ALL WHO LEARN FROM  
THEIR MISTAKES...

AND THE GREATEST VICTORIES ARE  
SOMETIMES THE SILENT ONES...

BUT THEY ARE  
VICTORIES  
NONE-THE-LESS.





THIS WILL BE MY STANCE...  
IT IS NOT HOW IT WAS FIRST  
INTENDED TO BE...  
BUT, WHAT IS EVER HOW  
IT WAS INTENDED?

WHATEVER THE REASON,  
THIS IS THE OUTCOME...  
AND I NOW HAVE THE  
CHANCE TO RULE...

PERHAPS I SEE THROUGH  
OPEN EYES NOW...  
FOR ALL I DESIRE IS THE  
PROTECTION OF MY SPECIES.

PRESERVATION... AND FOR THE  
FIRST TIME, PEACE IF IT IS POSSIBLE.

I REMEMBER A LOOK OF LONGING IN  
THE GAZE OF LEADERS BEFORE ME...  
A STARE THAT REGS TO ALL WHO  
DARE TO LOOK CLOSE ENOUGH...

ASKING NOTHING MORE THAN TO DO  
WHAT IS RIGHT, TO BE REGARDED AS  
JUST, AND MOST OF ALL, TO PROTECT  
THOSE WHO GIVE THEIR TRUST.

"FORTUNATE, IS ONE WHO'S  
EARS HAVE HEARD WISDOM,  
WHEN IT HAS BEEN SPOKEN."

AND NOW, I  
MUST SPEAK IT.

THE END.

SO WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT? THIS PLACE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE AN INTF SETUP TO ME--AND THE OGRE THAT DRAGGED US HERE SOMEHOW JUST DOESN'T SEEM...

OFFICIAL?

NO, NO... THE INTF IS NOT AN EMPLOYER.

I CARE TO THINK OF THEM AS MY EMPLOYEES--

MY PERSONAL SECURITY FORCE IF YOU WILL--

PLAYS IN MY OWN PERSONAL GAME.

YEAR 2166

LOCATION: HEADQUARTERS OF DAVID COURSE, DEVELOPER OF NEULORDON AND THE BUSINESS THAT UTILIZES IT.

A PIONEER IN THE FIELD OF INTER-PLANETARY TRANSPORTATION AND A MAN WHO'S IMPORTANCE IS SELF-EVIDENT.

## SpaceJackers

STORY BY EDD ARONZ  
ART BY TOM REYNOLDS

*The Continued Saga*

UNFORTUNATELY, THEY HAVE BECOME SOMETHING OF AN ARROGENT NUISANCE THAT'S WHY I HAVE BROUGHT YOU HERE.

DRACOR, RELEASE THEM.

THE HANDS OF A THIEF ARE THE TOOLS OF HIS TRADE AND I WOULDN'T WANT TO PURCHASE DAMAGED GOODS.

I THINK IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU ENDED THIS POWER PLAY DRAMA AND CUED US IN ON WHY WE'RE HERE.

IT IS VERY SIMPLE--YOU USED TO WORK FOR A MIDDLEMAN--

AN OUTSIDE CONTRACTOR--NOW YOU WORK DIRECTLY FOR ME.

ONE STEP HAS SIMPLY BEEN REMOVED. TAKE THEM AWAY DRACOR. THEIR IGNORANCE IS BEGINS TO ANNOY ME.



YOU ARE LUCKY TO BE ALIVE-- COULTRE IS NOT A PATIENT RUN.

AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED YOU AND YOUR BOMB CAN TAKE A FLYING LEAP.

WE WORK FOR OURSELVES--NOT ANY ARROGANT MASTER ON A POWER TRIP.



WHAT ARE YOU DOING WORKING FOR A GUY LIKE THAT?

I WORK FOR COULTRE BY CHOICE-- SOMETHING YOU DO NOT HAVE IN THIS MATTER.



EXCUSE-- WE WORK FOR WHOMEVER WE WANT--

THE HIGHEST BIDER IS MY EMPLOYER OF CHOICE. TELL YOUR BOMB TO GO AWAY.



YOU ARE NOW WORKING FOR A MAN THAT CAN HAVE YOU ELIMINATED AT ANY INSTANT--

I SUGGEST YOU TEMPER YOUR REMARKS. I FIND THEM AMUSING BUT THEY MIGHT FIND YOU DEAD.

COULTRE WILL PAY YOU WELL AND YOU WILL STAY ALIVE. NOW GO OUT AND DO WHAT YOU DO BEST. STEAL.



LEAVE BEFORE I LOSE MY PATIENCE.

I WILL CONTACT YOU TOMORROW-- BY THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE A SHIPMENT OF NEULORON TARGETED.

DON'T COUNT ON IT.



WE'VE GOT  
SOME THINKING  
TO DO—LOOKS LIKE  
THEY'VE GOT US LOOSE  
SO LET'S SPLIT BEFORE  
THEY CHANGE  
THEIR MINDS.

YEAH—  
LET'S GET  
OUT OF HERE—  
THIS PLACE  
GIVES ME THE  
CREEPS.



PULL IT  
UP, JACK!  
IT'S TIME WE  
GET THIS  
ROAD.

THERE GOES  
THE AGENT'S  
RECRUITS.  
I HEAR THEY'RE  
QUITE GOOD.

COUTRE  
DOESN'T HAVE  
MUCH PATIENCE.  
IF THEY RESIST...  
THEY'RE DEAD.

THE TWO DON'T WASTE ANY TIME LEAVING  
AN UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATION. JORDAN  
POSSESSES ONE OF THE FASTEST SHIPS  
OWNED BY ANYONE OUTSIDE OF THE INTF.

—PURCHASED WITH PROFITS GENERATED  
FROM A LONG CAREER OF PIRACY.

THE STATION DISAPPEARS QUICKLY  
INTO THE BACKGROUND AS THEIR  
SHIP HITS FULL SPEED.





I THINK  
IT'S TIME WE  
RECONSIDER  
OUR OPTIONS

I JUST  
LOVE A STERN  
WOMAN

NOT NOW  
DARLIN  
PLEASE!

WHEREVER IT  
WAS THAT SMO  
'CHANGING' IS GOOD"  
IS KNOWN IN  
MY BOOK

BUSINESS WAS  
DOING JUST FINE  
UNTIL YESTERDAY  
MORNING



SO WHAT  
ARE YOU THINKING  
CHIEF - FIGHT OR  
FLIGHT?

MAYBE  
A LITTLE BIT  
OF BOTH--LET'S  
TRY HAND A VISIT  
AND MAYBE WE CAN  
REDISCOVER OUR  
PERSPECTIVE



GET  
THE SHIP  
COORDINATED  
FOR WELPOU

IF I  
KNOW HONG  
HE'S ALREADY  
WAITING FOR  
US



NOT FAR BEHIND...

HUMAN  
LOYALTY  
AMUSES ME--  
LIKE THREE BLIND  
MICE THEY FLEE TO  
THEIR KEEPER



ACTIVATE  
THE GLOWING  
SHIELD. I DON'T  
WANT TO BE DETECTED.  
PLANET WELPOU  
SHOULD BE THEIR  
DESTINATION



HONG... I THINK YOU AND I NEED TO HAVE A LITTLE TALK.

I WAS WONDERING WHEN I'D HEAR FROM YOU AGAIN JORDAN. DO YOU HAVE A DELIVERY FOR ME OR IS IT SOMETHING ELSE THAT YOU WISH TO DISCUSS?

THE LATTER, OLD FRIEND.



AAAAH, SO I THOUGHT I'D AFRAY OUR BUSINESS HAD CHANGED.

I'LL INFORM MY GUARDS OF YOUR ARRIVAL. ENTER AT THE MAIN DOOR AND YOU WILL BE ESCORTED TO MY OFFICE.



A FEW OF OUR FRIENDS WILL ALSO BE JOINING US.

FRIENDS?

ACQUAINTANCES—PEOPLE OF A SIMILAR PROFESSION. YOU'LL SEE WHEN YOU ARRIVE.

I'VE HAD ENOUGH SURPRISES FOR TODAY HONG.



VELTOL, A MOSTLY UNINHABITED PLANET IN THE OCCE GALAXY. THE LANDSCAPE IS BARREN AND OPEN. THE PERFECT PLACE FOR A BLACK MARKETEER TO HAUNT.

UNWELCOME VISITORS ARE BOUGHT THE MINUTE THEY ENTER THE ATMOSPHERE. JORDAN AND HIS CREW ARE ALWAYS WELCOME.

AND TODAY THERE ARE OTHER VISITORS AS WELL.



HMM--LOOK  
WHAT THE CAT  
DRAWS IN

I THOUGHT  
YOU'D BE LOCKED  
UP OR DEAD  
BY NOW

NICE TO  
SEE YOU  
TOO



HOW'S  
THAT?

YIS NAME'S FREEZE--  
THEY DO BACK A LONG  
WAYS-- AN-JACKER  
JUST LIKE US

NOT AN  
GOOD OF  
COURSE

OF  
COURSE  
NOT

SHALL  
WE?

HOW NOT?  
I CAN'T WAIT  
TO SEE HOW  
ELSE HAS  
INTRO



WORDS OF A FEATHER



WELCOME  
MY FRIENDS.  
WELCOME. I THINK  
MOST OF YOU KNOW  
EACH OTHER  
THERE IS  
A LOT OF  
TALENT IN  
THIS ROOM

IF WE GET  
HARDER...I'LL  
SHOOT YOU  
FIRST



NO NEED FOR HOSTILITY JORDAN. LET'S TAKE A WALK.

WHO THE HELL ARE YOU WORKING FOR?

WE ARE CAPITALISTS IN THE PURSUIT OF MONEY. WE GO WHERE THE MONEY IS. IN THIS BUSINESS, AND COURTESY WAS THE ANGERED RIDER.

YOU SHOULD CHOOSE YOUR CLIENTS A LITTLE MORE CAREFULLY.

THIS PARTICULAR CLIENT WAS PURCHASING BOXES OF MY PRODUCT. I DON'T QUESTION A MAN'S INTENTIONS UNLESS HE

GETS YOU OUT OF THE PICTURE?



YES... UNTIL RECENTLY I NEVER KNEW WHO WAS ACTUALLY RECEIVING THE NEULORDON. COURTESY KEPT HIMSELF WELL INSULATED.

I WOULD DELIVER THE PRODUCT TO DISKOR AND THAT WAS IT.



I HAVE DELIVERED COUNTLESS GARMENTS TO DISKOR WHICH I NOW BELIEVE WERE ALL RECEIVED BY COURTESY. IT SEEMS HE IS AMONGST ALL OF THE NEULORDON.

NORMALLY I DON'T QUESTION A CLIENT BUT NOW THINGS HAVE BECOME PERSONAL.

HE WAS CAPTURED VIRTUALLY ALL OF THE KNOWN 14-JACKERS AND IS FORCING THEM TO WORK DIRECTLY FOR HIM.

IF YOU REFUSE YOU ARE RISKING YOUR LIFE.

MY LIFE WAS ALWAYS AT RISK-GOES WITH THE TERRITORY. I'LL NEED YOUR FASTEST SHIP-ONE WITH PLENTY OF FIRE POWER IN CASE WE RUN INTO TACKLE.







PRANK, DRUNKIE,  
ESTABLISH  
COMMUNICATIONS  
IMMEDIATELY



SPEAK.

CONTACT ME  
WHEN YOU HAVE  
THE NEULOCORON  
IN YOUR POSSESSION  
YOU WILL DELIVER IT  
DIRECTLY TO ME.

TELL  
YOUR BOSS  
WE'LL HAVE HIS  
FIRST DELIVERY  
TOMORROW.

OVER AND  
WAY OUT.



QUIT SCREWING  
AROUND AND GET  
READY. HONG AND  
I FOUND A SHIPMENT  
TRAVELING THROUGH  
THE NEXT STAR  
SYSTEM.

WE'LL  
INTERCEPT  
THEM IN FOUR  
HOURS. IT'S TIME  
TO GRAB SOME  
BART.

DAMN, JUST  
WHEN THINGS  
WERE GETTING  
INTERESTING.



THE CARGO SHIP IS  
LOCATED IN SHORT GRASS.

SHOOOOOOOM

KRAKA BOOOOOM

METRODY--METRODY  
WE ARE BEING ATTACKED  
DEFENSES ARE DOWN  
I REPEAT DEFENSES  
ARE DOWN.





LET'S LOAD  
UP FAST! THE  
SUPPORT SHIPS  
WILL BE HERE IN  
AN INSTANT.

CAN HEAR  
THE FAT LADY  
SINGING.

**SCHRAK**

EXIT... STAGE LEFT



I'VE GOT  
SOMETHING  
FOR YOU.

I ASSUME  
YOU'VE FOUND  
A NEW SHIRT.

A NEW  
RIDE AND A  
HELL OF A  
DELIVERY  
FOR SOUTHE.

WE'LL SOON  
MEET ME AT  
COORDINATE 3.3.3.33  
IMMEDIATELY.

I  
MIGHT  
BE A WHILE  
GET  
COMFORTABLE.

LET'S DELIVER THE  
GOODS AND TELL HIM  
TO FIND OUT WHERE COURSE  
IS HIDING HIS STASH AND  
HOW MUCH HE HAS.

ANYBE THEN WE'LL  
GET AN IDEA OF WHAT  
HE'S CAPABLE OF.

TO BE CONTINUED

STORY & ART  
**Rob Prior**  
DIGITAL & LETTERS  
Shannon Hineline

# the Stitchery Man

GOD IS MOCKING ME. IT ISN'T ENOUGH THAT I, SEBASTIAN BROWNA, SURVIVED MY TRIALS. THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF BEING LOCKED IN A COFFIN, ONLY TO BE FIRED BY THE SINGING OF A WOMAN NAMED DENISE, A REINCARNATION OF MY WIFE.

THE DEMON THAT BURIED ME, MALIC, WAS SEARCHING FOR THE HYMNAL MY WIFE POSSESSED. IT WAS AN ARTIFACT SO POWERFUL THAT HE COULD NOT HOLD IT UNLESS IT WAS OFFERED TO HIM.

HE KILLED MY WIFE AND ACCUSED ME OF WITCHCRAFT. STILL I REFUSED TO OFFER HIM THE HYMNAL.



SO MALIC PERFORMED A RITUAL THAT WOULD BIND ME IN THE GROUND WHERE I COULD NOT REVEAL HIS IDENTITY, OR HIS PLAN. I WAS CUT TO ALBANS AND SEWN BACK TOGETHER. THE POWER HE BOUND ME WITH SUSTAINED MY BODY IN ITS PRISON.

AFTER I HAD BEEN LIBERATED BY DENISE'S VOICE, I DISCOVERED THAT MALIC'S BINDING MAGIC HAD ALSO GRANTED ME THE ABILITIES THAT HE HIMSELF POSSESSED. SHADOWS WERE A WAY OF TRAVEL, AND I COULD JUMP FROM ONE TO THE OTHER.

IN TIME, I DISCOVERED ANOTHER ARTIFACT, A METAL PLATE WHICH SERVED TO TRAP THE SOULS OF DEMONS ONCE THEIR MORTAL SHELLS HAD BEEN DESTROYED. WITH THE HELP OF THE MAN NAMED MCGRIMMON, I WAS ABLE TO TRAP MALIC AND HIS SLAVES IN THE PLATE.

THE SOUL OF MY WIFE HAD OCCUPIED THE HYMNAL THREE THREE HUNDRED YEARS. SHE WAS A PART OF DENISE ALL ALONG. THEIR FRAGMENTED SOULS WERE FOR ME, AND I HAD FOUND A CONTENTMENT THAT I IMAGINE FEW SOULS REACH.

BUT, I AM STILL A STITCHERY MAN, A PATCH-WORK QUILTING OF PAIN AND LONELINESS. SOME OF THE PIECES TO MY PUZZLE REMAIN LOST AND I DON'T EVEN HAVE THE PICTURE ON THE BOX TO GUIDE ME. PERHAPS THAT IS NOT WHAT I SHOULD BE SEARCHING FOR.



I HAVE LIVED LONGER THAN ANY MAN SHOULD AND I WISH TO KNOW WHETHER I AM MORTAL. WILL I BE TRAPPED IN A ROTTING, MORTAL SHELL? IF SO, THEN THE EARTH IS JUST ANOTHER LOCK, ANOTHER COFFIN. I CANNOT ESCAPE. IF I CANNOT BE WHOLE, I WOULD RATHER BE NOTHING.



Boston

IT HAS BEEN MONTHS SINCE I FOUGHT MALIC, AND I AM NO CLOSER TO FINDING THE SOURCE OF MY EMPTINESS.

IT FEELS LIKE A HOLE THROUGH MY PETRIFIED INNARDS AND I AM EAGER TO FILL IT. THESE PAST FEW WEEKS, I HAVE STUDIED MY NEW WORLD. USING MY SHADOWSHIFTING ABILITY, I HAVE TRAVELLED TO LANDS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GLOBE.

THERE ARE MONUMENTS AND MARVELS UN-HEARD OF IN MY OWN TIME. STILL, SOMETHING BRINGS ME BACK TO BOSTON. IT IS A LARGER CITY THAN I REMEMBER, HAVING EXPANDED OVER MOST OF THE SURROUNDING VILLAGES THESE THREE HUNDRED YEARS.

THE PEOPLE HAVE BECOME AS MUCH A RESTLESS MOB AS THE CENS WHO BUSED ME AS A WITCH. NO MATTER HOW ALIEN THIS CITY IS TO ME, I STILL COME UPON THINGS THAT SEEM FAMILIAR. TONIGHT I FOLLOW A MAN WHOSE FACE I RECOGNIZE, BUT DON'T REMEMBER. HE APPEARS TO BE A MAN I KNOW BEFORE MY IMPRISONMENT, BUT HOW COULD THAT BE POSSIBLE?

A village outside Boston  
1695

GOODMAN PERCE  
MINISTER SMITH HAS ASKED  
ME TO GO TO BOSTON ON BUSINESS  
I THOUGHT I MIGHT SAY GOODBYE  
TO YOU BEFORE I LEFT. I MAY  
NOT SEE YOU FOR QUITE  
SOME TIME

LONGER THAN YOU THINK, GOODMAN BROWN.  
I'M MOVING OUT OF THE VILLAGE. THIS  
PLACE HAS BECOME A HARBOR OF MALICE  
AND HATE. I HAVE SEEN NEIGHBORS AND  
FRIENDS IDLY ACCUSE EACH OTHER OF  
CONSORTING WITH DEMONS. THIS VILLAGE  
WAS ONCE A PLACE WHERE THERE WERE  
NO SECRETS TO KEEP.

I COULD HEAR THE WOMEN  
GOSSIP FROM THE MEETING  
HOUSE, BUT NOW THEY COULD  
TOLERATE ONE ANOTHER. THEY  
ARE A PACK OF WOLVES READY  
TO TURN ON THEIR OWN HOUNDED.

OH NOW REALLY.  
THERE'S ARE DIFFICULT  
THINGS.

YOU CAN'T EXPECT  
THE VILLAGE TO SIMPLY  
ACCEPT THE EVIL THAT SURROUNDS  
US IN THIS WORLD. TRUST MINISTER  
SMITH TO GUIDE US.

WELL I SHOULD  
HOPE NOT. I ASKED  
HIM TO LOOK IN ON MY WIFE  
AND MY DAUGHTER ABBY  
WHILE I AM AWAY. I  
TRUST HIM.

HOW FAR GOODMAN  
BROWN? I'M LEAVING TO  
PROTECT MY FAMILY. I FEAR  
WHAT THE MINISTER'S GUIDANCE  
MIGHT MEAN TO THEM.

I FEAR MINISTER  
SMITH MAY BE THE SOURCE  
OF THE PROBLEM



IF THIS IS THE SAME GOODMAN PERCIE I KNEW SO LONG AGO, WHY HAS HE NOT AGED A DAY? I HAVE FOLLOWED HIM THROUGHOUT THE CITY IN NO DISCREET PATH AS IF HE WERE TRACKING AN ANIMAL. PERCIE WAS ALWAYS A FINE HUNTER, BUT THESE ARE NOT HIS WOODS AND THIS IS NOT 1895.

WHY ARE YOU ALL WEARING FERRIN'S BRANDING? DON'T YOU REALIZE WHO HE IS?

HE'S THE LEADER OF THE TRIBE. HE'S NEVER LET US DOWN IN THE PAST. IF IT WEREN'T FOR FERRIN, NONE OF US WOULD HAVE MADE IT PAST THE NINETEEN HUNDREDS.

HE CALLED US TOGETHER. SAVED THE PACK. MADE US WHAT WE ARE.

AND WOULD THAT SAME MAN ORDER A HOLY WAR? WOULD HE PUSH US TO TURN ON EACH OTHER LIKE ANIMALS?

FERRIN SAYS WE ARE ANIMALS. JUST AS AN ANIMAL WOULD TEAR OFF ITS LEG RATHER THAN BE TRAPPED, WE MUST ELIMINATE THE WEAK SO THAT WE CAN SURVIVE.

WE ARE NOT ANIMALS! WE ARE NOT HUMANS, BUT WE ARE NOT ANIMALS! LISTEN TO ME, FERRIN HAS CHANGED. THIS IS NOT THE SAME MAN WHO LED THE CALL.

HE'S POSSESSED BY AN ANCIENT ONE, A DEMON OF IMMENSE POWER. FERRIN HAS ENSLAVED YOU. YOU MAY NOT REALIZE IT, BUT HE OWNS YOUR BODY AND SOUL.

FERRIN THOUGHT YOU MIGHT SEE IT THAT WAY. YOU'VE BECOME A LIABILITY TO THE PACK. YOU'RE THE MOURNED LEG PERCIE, AND IT'S HIGH TIME WE GHEWED YOU OFF.



I DON'T KNOW WHY THESE STRANGE CREATURES DIDN'T SCENT ME, BUT I'M NOT DISAPPOINTED. IT GIVES ME THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE. I STRIKE FROM THE FLANK, AND AM ABLE TO TOP THE FIRST, BUT PIERCE IS LEFT TO CONTEND WITH THE OTHER TWO. THIS CREATURE'S FLESH IS DENSE AND ITS MUSCLES SEEM ALMOST TOO LARGE FOR ITS FRAME.

ITS STRENGTH IS ALMOST A MATCH FOR MY OWN. IT MIGHT EASILY OVERPOWER ME, BUT ITS MOVEMENTS ARE UNCOORDINATED, AS IF BEING CONTROLLED BY SOMEONE ELSE. I HEAR ITS IMPOSSIBLY LARGE SKULL CRACK WETLY BENEATH MY FEET. PIERCE KILLS THE SECOND ONE, BUT THE THIRD IS TOO DEVILISH. HE DOESN'T SEE IT APPROACH. IT'S A COWARDLY ATTACK.



FERRIN WILL HEAR OF THIS. MAKE NO MISTAKE, THERE WILL BE BLOOD FOR BLOOD. THIS TRIBE NO LONGER HOLDS A PLACE FOR YOU PIERCE.



WHO ARE YOU?  
IF YOU MEAN TO KILL ME  
I ASSURE YOU THESE INJURIES  
ARE NOT AS BAD AS  
THEY SEEM



HOLD, GOODWIN PIERCE.  
MY NAME IS SEBASTIAN BROWN.  
I FOLLOWED YOU HERE. I WISHED  
TO KNOW WHY YOU HAVEN'T  
AGED A DAY IN THREE  
HUNDRED YEARS

YES, YOU MUST BE  
BROWN. I RECOGNIZE YOUR  
VOICE, AND NO ONE HAS CALLED ME  
"GOODMAN PIERCE" IN HUNDREDS OF  
YEARS, BUT HOW CAN THIS BE? AHAH,  
YOU MUST BE ONE OF HIS STITCHERY MEN,  
THAT EXPLAINS HOW YOU'RE HERE. IN MY  
CASE LYCANTHROPY HAS KEPT ME VITAL.  
THESE WOUNDS SHOULD BE GONE WITHIN  
MINUTES. MY FAMILY AND I WERE  
ATTACKED BY A PACK OF WOLVES WHEN  
WE LEFT THE VILLAGE. ONLY I SURVIVED  
WITH MY NEW "GIFTS." AFTER I HEARD  
WHAT THEY DID TO YOU, I THOUGHT  
IT BEST NOT TO RETURN TO  
THE VILLAGE.

THIS FERRIN YOU  
SPOKE OF, YOU SAID HE WAS  
A DEMON THAT SOMEONE POSSESSED  
HIS BODY. I'VE FOUGHT SUCH A CREATURE,  
CALLED MALIC. IT HAD INHABITED  
MINISTER SWIFT'S BODY.

I'M AFRAID YOU WERE RIGHT  
ABOUT HIM AND WHAT HE COULD DO  
TO THE PEOPLE OF OUR VILLAGE. IF FERRIN  
IS ONE OF THESE DEVILS, THEN I  
CAN DESTROY IT.

WITH WHAT?



WITH THIS.



GLVER!

I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE PLATE IS MADE OF, BUT IT HAS THE ABILITY TO FORCE THE DEMONS FROM THEIR BODIES ONCE THEY HAVE BEEN KILLED. IN ORDER TO DESTROY FERRIN, I WILL HAVE TO USE THIS IN CONJUNCTION WITH ANOTHER ARTIFACT. IF HE IS ANYTHING LIKE MALIC, THEN HE IS FAR MORE POWERFUL THAN THESE POOR SOULS. THEY HAVE REVERTED TO THEIR HUMAN FORMS IN DEATH. WATCH AS THE PLATE TRAPS THEM. *STITCH. STITCH. STITCH.*

I'VE SUSPECTED AS MUCH FOR QUITE SOME TIME NOW. IT'S LIKE A PUZZLE WHERE HE'S TAKEN SOME OF THE REAL PIECES AND REPLACED THEM WITH HIS OWN. I CAN FIND DARK AND VITAL SHAPES MOVING ABOUT WITHIN THE SHADOWS. I REMEMBER EVERY SECOND OF MY IMPRISONMENT UNDERGROUND. IT'S A Joke YOU KNOW. IF I HAD KNOWN WHILE I WAS TRAPPED THAT I COULD TRAVEL THROUGH SHADOWS, THEN PERHAPS I COULD'VE SLIPPED FREE RIGHT AWAY. BUT THEN I MIGHT LACK THE HATE AND INSIGHT IT HAS GIVEN ME. SOMETIMES I CAN HEAR MY WIFE'S HYMNAL SPEAKING TO ME, THE SOULS INSIDE CRY OUT FOR FREEDOM, FOR REDEMPTION.

YOU SEEM WELL ACQUAINTED WITH THESE RITUALS. WAS SMITH RIGHT ABOUT YOU BEING A WITCH? OR, IN BURYING YOU, WAS MALIC SOMEHOW GRANTED YOU SOME OF HIS POWERS? YOU HAVE LOST YOUR SCENT, JUST AS FERRIN DID.

I THINK YOU'RE INSANE. NO OFFENSE.

NONE TAKEN. LET'S FIND FERRIN.



THE MAN WHO DESTROYED MALIC WAS WITH PERCE. HE WAS JUST AS YOU DESCRIBED HIM. WHAT IF HE COMES HERE? THERE AREN'T ANYMORE OF US IN THE BUILDING. EVERYONE IS IN HIDING.

YOU'RE NOT VERY BRAVE WITHOUT A MOB BEHIND YOU. BE ASSURED THAT PERCE WILL COME HERE FIRST. IF HE WAS ONE OF MALIC'S STITCHERY MEN, THEN HE HAS THE ABILITY TO TRAVEL ANYWHERE HE PLEASES. YOU BETTER HOPE HE HASN'T DISCOVERED ANY OF HIS OTHER ABILITIES. MALIC WAS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL OF THE ANCIENT ONES. HIS CREATIONS ARE IMMENSELY STRONG. MOST OF THEM JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO USE IT.



FERRIN! YOU CAN'T MANIPULATE THE TREE FOREVER. THIS INTERNAL WAR OF YOURS WILL SEND US BACK TO THE DARK AGES. OUR NUMBERS WILL BE SCATTERED ONCE MORE TO BE HUNTED BY HUMANS. WHO ARE YOU TO CHOOSE WHICH OF US ARE WORTHY TO RUN WITH THE PACK? YOU WERE OUR TRUSTED SAVIOR, AND NOW YOU'VE LET THE HATEFUL THING INSIDE YOU REDUCE YOU TO THE LEVEL OF THE MOB'S MENTALITY.



I WAS THE FIRST OF YOU, BUT I HAVE NEVER MADE A DECISION FOR YOU. I DIDN'T SERVE THE CALL WHICH BROUGHT ALL LYCANTHROPES TOGETHER. THEY CHOSE ME. I WAS JUST A YOUNG OF THE MOB. IF IT HADN'T BEEN ME, IT WOULD'VE BEEN SOMEONE ELSE. PERHAPS IT WOULD'VE BEEN MALIC, OR ONE OF THE OTHER ANCIENT ONES, BUT THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN SOMEONE.



CRASH!

IT WAS ALWAYS YOU  
CAN YOU HONESTLY SAY  
THAT YOU COULDN'T HAVE  
WALKED AWAY? THERE ARE NO  
SMART AND RIGHTEOUS MORBS,  
JUST STUPID, FEARFUL  
INDIVIDUALS.

NO! THERE'S ALWAYS  
A CHOICE. YOU COULD HAVE  
DONE GOOD WITH THE POWER  
THEY GAVE YOU. YOU COULD HAVE LED  
THEM TO PEACE. INSTEAD, YOU CHOSE  
TO ABUSE THAT POWER. YOU CHOSE  
TO SET THEM AGAINST  
THEMSELVES.

GOD!

HEY!

WHAT THE #320?!



MALIC SHOULD HAVE  
BURIED YOU. HIS STITCHERY  
MEN HAVE ALWAYS BEEN SUCH  
A NUISANCE. I AM TIRED OF  
HAVING TO KILL THEM OFF. I DO  
NOT HUNT THEM, THEY ALWAYS  
COME BROODING ME FOR  
THEIR OWN DEATH.

IS THAT WHAT  
YOU'VE COME FOR?  
YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW  
TO DIE, SO THE HOLE CAUSED BY  
ALL THE PAIN AND LONELINESS  
CAN FINALLY BE  
FILLED?

WHY DOES EVERYONE  
CHOOSE ME TO MAKE THEIR  
PROVISIONS? CAN'T THEY SEE  
ME FOR WHAT I AM? I AM FERDIN,  
"THE DESTROYER," "THE RUNNER,"  
AND STILL THEY CHOSE ME.

BECAUSE YOU  
CANNOT REFUSE THEM.



FERRIN'S LUNGE BRIND OUT HIS LAST BREATH, WHICH CARRY WELL IN THE NIGHT AIR. THIS DOESN'T FEEL THE SAME AS WHEN I KILLED MALIC. THERE HAD ALMOST BEEN REVENGE IN FERRIN'S VOICE. WAS IT FERRIN HIMSELF, OR THE DEMON INSIDE HIM?

YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW I KILLED THE OTHER STITCHERY MEN. I'LL SET THE WAIN AND LOGS GROWING DAY BY DAY. WELL, I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU THIS TIME I CHOOSE.



WITH THE PLATE AND HYMNAL I ROBIN THE RITUAL I USED TO REMOVE MALIC'S SOUL FROM ITS RUINED BODY. HOWEVER, NOW IT IS MORE OF A MERCY KILLING, LIKE SHOOTING A HORSE WITH A BROKEN LEG. AS FERRIN'S SOUL IS BEING SUCKED INTO THE PLATE, I HEAR THE SOULS TRAPPED IN MY WIFE'S HYMNAL CALL OUT. IT IS THE SOUND OF SADISTIC JOY, OF TORTURED BEINGS SCREAMING FOR VENGEANCE AND THEN BEING INTO SLEEP ONCE MORE.



St. Michael's  
Cathedral

YOU'VE DONE MY  
PEOPLE A SERVICE.  
WITHOUT PERRIN'S INFLUENCE,  
THEY CAN MAKE UP THEIR  
OWN MINDS, ENFORCE  
THEIR OWN DESTINY.

I DON'T THINK I'VE  
HELPED ANYONE HERE.  
DO YOU REALLY THINK ANYTHING  
EXCEPT PERRIN WAS KEEPING  
YOUR PEOPLE TOGETHER?

WE'LL...WE HAVE  
OUR PRIDE. WE ALL  
SHARE THE HERITAGE  
OF OUR "GIFT."

YOUR PRIDE IS  
WHAT WAS TEARING YOUR  
PEOPLE APART. THEY BECAME  
OBSESSIVELY CONCERNED WITH  
WHICH OF THEM WAS THE PUREST.  
THEY STOPPED BEING INDIVIDUALS  
AND BECAME THE MEN THAT  
PERRIN COULDN'T REFUSE.

I SUSPECT THINGS  
WILL RETURN TO THE WAY  
THEY WERE BEFORE HE CAME ALONG.  
THERE WILL BE MISERSON AND CHAOS.  
THEN YOUR PEOPLE WILL SCATTER.  
WITH THEIR NUMBERS SO DWINDLED,  
THEY'LL PROBABLY HAVE TO GO INTO  
HIDING. GO BE FRODO. I  
HAVE BETTER THINGS  
TO DO.

# The Demon Apostle

An excerpt by  
**R.A. Salvatore**  
Art by Alan Pollack

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Winter is ending on the land. Uncle Marthe has somehow strangely, it seems quiet and soft, as if the seasons will be gentle this year, as if Nature herself, like all the folk of the land, is in need of repose. I do not know how I accept that this will prove true, but I cannot deny that which my eager wishes tell me. Perhaps it is just that I am in need of repose, Uncle Marthe, and I know that Pory is, as well. Perhaps my belief that the season will be gentle is no more than hopeful thinking.

Still, Pory, I heard, and I heard few reports of fighting, even of any uprisings of goblins, ponies, or giants all during our recent trip from St. Mer-Abbé. Our journey north from Palmaris to the river towns of Carr-Tirell and Landdown was without incident, with the only unusual incident in the report being a contingent of Kanguine sent from Ural to reinforce Palmaris. They subsequently struck out north of the city to help secure the settlements of the handful of communities in the region north of Palmaris lands.

We have heard of few disasters in the weeks since our arrival, mostly it has been quiet, comfortably so. Tomas Gingswater, who leads the three hundred during winter, and Shamus Kilmoney, captain of the Kanguine brigade, speak hopefully of a return to normalcy by the time winter relinquishes its grip on the land.

A return to normalcy?

They do not understand. Many have died, but many will be born in safe their places, many homes have been heated in the ground, but they will be rebuilt. And so in the coming months the region may outwardly resemble what we once knew as our "normal" lives.

But I have used that word before, Uncle Marthe, after the first ending of Dandala before I came to know the Tsoif-daf. Before I found you and I know the rest of this war will be lasting. It is in the hearts of the survivors where the mark of the dragon daze will remain, in the grief of those who lost friends and family, the shock of those displaced, the pain of those who seek to their former villages to find a blackened field. Though they do not yet know it, the very definition of what is normal has changed. The aftermath of war may be more painful than the fighting itself.

Would I see the world the same way had the goblins not come to Dandala three years ago? Was only was the course of my life changed by my abuse by the Tsoif-daf and the making they gave me, but so were my perspectives on reality itself my view of days, of community, even of morality, thus goblins of human systems.

And so these people are changed in ways they do not yet understand.

My greatest concern is for Pory. The first day's action of Dandala of which she and I were the only survivors and in which her entire family was slaughtered nearly broke her, and her recovering under a name that led her to Palmaris and a new life, one in which she could not even remember her tragic past. Only the love of her adoptive parents saw her through that dark time and now they too, have become victims of war. Tragically has visited Pory again.

When we ran out of St. Mer-Abbé, our mission there complete, our final borderward front, the nearly ruined abbey and were back. And she re-created that structure, gnomes in hand, she would have worked devotion before meeting her ultimate end.

And she didn't care, Uncle Marthe, for herself or for those she might have killed. So blind was her rage at the discovery of the mangled corpses of her dead adoptive parents that she was ready to destroy St. Mer-Abbé and all in it, to destroy all the world, I fear, in one mighty outpouring of rage.

She has been quiet since we left the abbey and crossed the Masses Deland into lands more familiar. Seeing Belior O'Connelly in place at the new proprietor of Fellowship Way has helped to calm her, I believe, helped her to find a bit of "normalcy" in her life once more.

But I fear for her and our work over her.

For myself, I know only what the lasting emotional effects of this latest struggle will be. As with all the survivors, I will grow from the losses, will find new insights as I contemplate the enormity of death. I hold few fears now. Sometimes, amid all the carnage, I have found at least peace. I know no what waits after death, Uncle Marthe, and I know that I cannot know.

A simple, foolish sentiment that sounds, and yet it strikes my heart and soul as a profound revelation. What I understand now is the inevitability of death, whether through battle, disease, or simply age. And because I understand and accept that, I can longer fear life. How strange that if it seems to me now that no problem is too daunting and no obstacle too imposing, for all that I have so do it mental myself that one day I will be no more, that my body is chi-

ronically food for the worms, and I am not afraid to try. Many times recently I have been asked to stand before hundreds of men and women and explain to them the course I think we should all follow. And while in many people to a younger Ellayan, perhaps that would have been uncomfortable leaving how the audience might view my words, knowing that I would do something foolish, like trip and fall down before them all now that nervousness across a petty, stupid thing.

All I need to when to asked, is to remind myself that one day I will not matter, that one day I will be gone from that world, that one day, chances beise, someone might find my house and the embarrassing mumble should I ever happen, seems like little to fear indeed.

So the land is at peace, and Ellayan is at peace, and goodness indeed will this peace become if I can find a way to calm Pory's emotional turmoil.

- Ellayan Wyndon

Chapters

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Passion for Life

The room was dark, the curtains drawn, but the night could see the glow of the problem they against their last-colored edges. Instinctively he reached behind him, seeking the comforting, warm feel of his lover's body, but she was not there.

Ellayan rolled over, surprised. Pory was not in the bed, nor even in the room, he realized as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. With a groan, for he was not accustomed to sleeping in any bed, he drew a soft one and this one was especially pillow, for the folk of the town had given the stager the finest bed in Carr-Tirell-Ellayan rolled off the bed to his feet, startled, and stretched. He went to the window, noting that Pory's fire sword was not beside his own. That did not alarm him, though, as he came more fully awake, he could guess easily enough where she was.

When he pulled aside the curtains, he found that it was later than he had believed. The sky was thick with grey clouds, but he could tell that the top half of the sun was already peaking over the horizon. And the days this time of year were shorter of all, for they were now in the month of Decadencia, the month and less, and the winter solstice was less than three weeks away.

A scan of the forest north of the town showed the ranger the expected twilight. He went through a series of slow, exaggerated movements then, sliding low to the floor then back up, arms wide outstretched, as he limbered up his too-thin shoulders, two-hundred-and-seventy-pound, muscular frame. Then he pulled on his clothes and cloak quickly, waiting to join his love, and took up the magnificent Tsepso, his chosen forged sword, the reward of his uncle Marthe, the emblem of his position as ranger.

His room was on the northern edge of town, as he had requested, and so he saw few of the townfolk as he reached away past a curtain and the skeletal remains of the barn he and Jaceval had burned on one escape from the marauders who had previously held Carr-Tirell and our last the forest.

A blanket of snow had settled thickly about the region only a week ago, but the weather had turned warmer since then. Now a low fog clung above the ground, blurring the walls, hiding the leafless branches. But the ranger knew the wall, delivered field he and Pory had chosen for their morning ritual: the divine sword dance, he called it.

He came upon her quietly, back not wanting to disturb her and also to glimpse her at the dance in its most form.

And then he saw her and his heart was softened, and all his body felt warm.

She was naked, her formless frame veiled only by the morning mist, her arched muscles glimmering as they moved through the perfectly balanced twirling of his delicate dance, wearing a wondrous dance of balance and motion. Ellayan could hardly believe how much he loved her, how much the sight of her thrilled and moved him. Her thick blond hair was longer now, reaching several inches below her shoulders and trailing her with every turn, as the quiver of her blue eyes seemed to lead her. She held Defenders a close, slender sword, its silver blade shining in the dull morning light as sparkling suddenly with an orange that whatever is caught the reflection of the candle's she had lit nearby.

The ranger crouched and continued to admire her, drinking a vision, for it used to be Pory who stood on him at his delicate dance in the days when she desired to learn the secrets of the dancer. How well she had studied! His admiration was undoubtedly one part of his inspired by the beauty of her movements, the level of harmony she had achieved in so short a time, and the other

based on simple love. He and Pory had not been intimate in several weeks, not since before the end of summer on the road to St. Mary-Abelle to rescue Bradwin, when he had unexpectedly broken their vow of abstinence and seduced her. Elyrian had tried to expect that passionate scene several times since, but Pory had modestly refused. Looking at him now, he was nearly overwhelmed. Her allure was undeniable, the smoothness of her skin, the soft curves of her bared body, the moistness of his lips, his legs, so shapely and strong. Elyrian could not imagine anyone more beautiful or enticing. He realized that he was breaking more heavily, that he was suddenly very warm and though the day was not cold for the season, the air was surely not warm.

Embarrassed, feeling that that he was invading Pory's privacy, the ranger pushed the foolish thoughts from his mind and fell fully into the much-travelled cloak furnished him by his years of discipline with the Timberland. Soon he left Elyrian Wyndon behind, riding on the calm winds of Nightbird, the warrior now given him by the elves.

He won his cloak and in a fall to the ground, then quietly pulled off the rest of his clothing. Taking Torque to hand, he walked from the brush. So deep in concentration was Pory that he did not notice his approach until he was within a stride of her. She turned to face him, startled, and did not catch his smile with her own.

Her expression, pure and firm and blue eyes blazing intensely, caught Nightbird off guard. He was even more surprised when Pory moved suddenly, throwing her sword into the ground near his feet so forcefully that it sprang up inches into the hardened earth.

"I did not mean to disturb you," the ranger murmured, as a loss, for he and Pory had shared little dreams for weeks, had word-danced together since he had taught it to her, the two looking at one that they might begin their fighting styles and movements into perfect harmony. Also, both of them had come to substitute the sword dance for a different form of intimacy, the one that they had agreed they could not now share.

Pory did not reply, except to leave the distance between them, staring up at him, touching hand, never planning on her neck and shoulders.

"I will leave if you desire," the ranger started to say, but was cut short as Pory reached up suddenly, grabbing the hair on the back of his head, moving his body against his, and pulling his face down, while she came up on top, locking him in a hungry kiss.

Torque fell to hand, the ranger's arms were around her, but loosely, aware that this might be heading.

Pory showed no signs of releasing, her lips growing more passionate, hungry, with each passing second. The meditative state was long gone from Elyrian; no more was he the elven warrior. Still, he kept his face close to hers enough faintly to push Pory back a bit, to break the kiss and stare at her questioning. Not enough that they had produced their love for each other again, though they were in the eyes of all who knew them, in their hearts, and truly they believed, to the eyes of God-husband and wife, they had vowed to abstain from marital relations for fear that Pory, whose duties were no less demanding and dangerous than Elyrian's, would become pregnant.

Elyrian started to ask Pory about that part of abstinence, but she interrupted him with a gasp. She reached over and pulled Torque from his grasp and threw the sword to the ground, then went back at Elyrian, locking him in a deep kiss, her hands moving about his back, and then lower.

Elyrian knew the strength of passion. He wanted Pory so very badly, loved Pory so very deeply. Still locked in the passionate kiss, she did down to the ground, yelling her love; stop her. The ranger wanted this moment to last, wanted to know the beauty of loving with Pory, to be tried so slow things down.

Pory roughly pushed him over onto his back and chased him all the way, eagerly, hungrily, growing with every determined movement. Then they were joined and all was motion and sound. The sound Elyrian fought hard to remove his thoughts from the ritual, trying to make some sense of it all. Always before, their lovemaking had been gentle and warm, full of words and teasing caresses. Now, it was physical, even angry, and the grunting, growling sounds escaping Pory's lips were filled with rage as with desire. Elyrian knew and understood that the warrior angry with him, but rather that she was releasing his anger at all the world through him. This was her release from, as distant of, all the hatred and pain. And so Elyrian allowed her to lead him in that most intimate of dances, tried to give her what she most needed from him, both physically and emotionally.

Even when they were done, wrapped in Pory's cloak and in each other's arms near the small fire, there was no conversation, no questions. Two

overwhelmed and too consumed by the physical desire to pose the issue, Elyrian closed off, and was only half aware when Pory slipped from his grasp.

He awakened barely moments later, to see Pory sitting in the middle of the small field beside their weapons, with Elyrian's cloak pulled tightly about her. He studied the faraway look in her eyes, the gleam of a tear on her soft cheek.

Elyrian looked up at the empty spaces of the sky, so confused as he had been when Pory had looked him in that first hour. And she was even more confused than he, he realized. He decided that he would wait patiently for his answers, would let her come to him. When she was ready.

An hour later, when Elyrian returned to Camp Tindil, the owner was looking with surprise. The ranger came back alone, for they had left him on the field without a word. She had heard him suddenly though, perhaps in apology, perhaps merely to excuse him that she was not right. Elyrian had accepted that less as explanation enough for the poems, for to him no apology was needed, but no matter what Pory did or not it would not affect his fears of her. Their lovemaking that morning had been necessary for Pory, confirming and freeing, but the ranger knew that the demons within his love had not been morticed.

He was worrying about her, wondering what more he could do to help her, as he walked to his appointment with Tomas Gimprow.

Though Elyrian arrived early, Tomas was already waiting for him in the centrally located hut that served as the town's meeting hall. Tomas was a hardy man, not very tall but stocky and hardened from years of farming. He rose and extended his hand to Elyrian, the ranger clasped it noting that Tomas' hand was rough and his grip strong. Elyrian realized that in all the weeks he had known Tomas, that was the first time they had shared a handshake. And Tomas had a wide smile—rather merry—in his dark face.

Tomas' plans were in motion, the ranger realized.

"View from Nightbird this fine day?" Tomas asked.

Elyrian shrugged.

"Well, I would guess," Tomas said lightly, "that beautiful complexion came through snow only a few minutes before you, and from the same direction from the northern forest." Tomas offered a wink as he finished, a good-natured grin and not loved, but Elyrian returned it with a smile.

"The caravan has been sponsored," Tomas declared, clearing his throat and changing the subject. "It is nearly so late in the year, we could depart in a few weeks."

"We must be certain that winter's grip on the land is ended,"

Elyrian replied.

"Oh?" Tomas asked with a smile. Ever since Elyrian and Pory had joined him in Camp Tindil, Tomas had been trying to persuade Nightbird to join his Timberlands beyond caravan, but the ranger had been elusive and had not committed to the journey. Tomas had pressed him hard, but fairly, though some of the sponsoring merchants would not provide their money and supplies unless the ranger agreed to lead the way.

Elyrian looked at the hopeful, crooked grin on the man who was a friend of Tomas Gimprow and recognized that the man was his friend. "I will accompany you," he confirmed. "Doubts in my home, and Pory's as well, and I believe that we have at least a stake in its rebuilding as any."

"But what of your duties to the Kingdom?" Tomas asked. It was no secret that Nightbird had been working with Shamus Kiboney, captain of the Kingdom's brigade, to ensure the security of the land. Shamus and the ranger had become friends, so it was rumored, and Pory was reportedly even closer to the man.

"Captain Kiboney is convinced that the region is secure," Elyrian explained. "Pory spoke with him yesterday and night again to walk him this morning, discussing his plans for marring his bride to the north."

Tomas nodded, but he was obviously not thrilled with the news of the soldier's impending departure.

"She is trying to convince the captain to remain a bit longer," Elyrian went on, "perhaps through the winter, and even to accompany us further to the north in the spring. No doubt the King desires the reopening of the Timberlands as soon as possible."

"He does indeed," Tomas smiled. "The merchant Corde, my chief sponsor, is a personal friend of King Grand Brock Ural. Corde would not be so eager to press north unless he was certain of the King's desire to reopen trade with the Timberlands."

It all seemed perfectly logical to both men. During the war, many sailing ships had been lost or damaged by powerful landstorms, and the only number large enough to replace must come from the apparently endless Timberlands, the land of Dwindles, Woody Meadows, and End-of-the-World.

"Perhaps Captain's emissary should also speak with Captain Kilbenny," the ranger suggested.

Tomas nodded. "I will see to it," he promised. "Glad I am to have Neighbor and Pory along on this dangerous journey, and every word we can obtain will be a welcome addition. I need not explain any fees to you, for we both understand that no one has yet determined the extent of the storm of the distant days of my. We might strike out to the north only to find our thousand goblins, gnomes, and ponies camped by the roadside, singing their songs of cruelty and terror."

Elystan managed to smile at that, for he did not believe the words for a moment. There might indeed be monsters up there, but not on the scale to which Tomas alluded with the bending face, the physical manifestation of the demon devil, destroyed.

"I only wish that Roger Lockstone were here and could journey with us," Tomas added.

"Belton will find him if he has returned to Palmaria," Elystan assured him. When Elystan and Pory had passed through Palmaria on their return from St. Mico-Aldie, they had seen only a small band of the new proprietors of Fellowship Wy, but also had charged him with finding Roger and telling the young man of their latest movement once he returned from his trip with Baron Radeforth Beldborough to speak with the King. The rangers did not doubt that Roger would rush back to Carr Tindla to join him and Pory as soon as he knew in the Baron was ended.

"I hope he returns before the beginning of Belton," Tomas said, "for the start of the third month marks the start of our journey, unless the weather turns against us. It might be that the road will stay clear enough for him to get to us, if the weather holds."

Elystan nodded, noting the warning on the man's face. Tomas was eager to go north, as were many others, but they were all taking that unreasonable weather too much to heart. The end of Calender had brought a fall of snow, but that had been almost completely melted by many days of warmer weather. It was impossible for the King of Hono-the-Bear, in the Barren of Almaria, to the merchants, and to most like Tomas, that once the Timberlands was free of mountains, men from Hono-the-Bear be the ones to recede it and restore the winter trade. The Timberlands was the only area that could supply the needed legs for ships' masts. By using the Timberlands was not ruled by any of the three kingdoms—Hono-the-Bear, Belton, or rugged Almaria—but it had always served the King and merchants of Hono-the-Bear well to have the region populated predominantly by their own. Baron Radeforth had come to Carr Tindla recently that the Almarians meant to settle the distant Timberlands, and while most feared that such a development would stop the trade in the large trees, all realized that it would make the merchants of Hono-the-Bear pay more dearly.

Elystan had not been able to confirm those rumors and, in fact, believed that they might be merely a ploy by Carril or some other foolish merchant to spur the citizens northward sooner, but the rangers couldn't argue against the logic of getting back in the north. And aside from the personal considerations, there were personal ones. His father, Olaf Wyndon, had gone to Dwindle in his own lifetime, to spend place where no man had been, to view right never seen by any man. Olaf Wyndon had taken great pride in his decision to go north and had become the unofficial leader of Dwindle.

Before the darkness weakened.

It was also near Dwindle, in a sheltered place, that Elystan had found the grave of Mother, his long-lost uncle, that three-stained ranger who had come before him and where he had stayed. Tempest, once Mother's nurse. And in the former near Dwindle, Elystan had met Bradenwood, the center, a dear friend now returned to him, a friend from the grave itself. And in that same place, Bradenwood had introduced Elystan to the rangers from black stables, Symphory, the ranger's mistress, the ranger's friend.

His ties to the region were deeply rooted. Now he felt a duty to his dear father and finally to go back and help rebuild Dwindle and the other two towns, then to serve to their province, the quiet and little-known ranger vigilantly patrolling the forest.

"Wood has a new series of the merchants had set to be well rewarded," Tomas remarked.

Elystan looked at him carefully, noted how he rubbed his hands

together. If Tomas wanted to go to the Timberlands to make his fortune, then Elystan knew the man was in for a great disappointment. The life there was hard. Hunting, fishing, foraging, and farming was necessary to eat with the trade in wood. No, a man did not make his money in the Timberlands to get wealthy; he settled there to live as a freedom that could not be found anywhere else. Tomas could speak of being "well rewarded," but Tomas would learn, if he did not already know, that those rewards came from more than the King's gold.

"We get ahead of general thinking," Elystan remarked. "Reversing Dwindle and the other towns depends upon whether or not the merchant have deserted the region. If they are still occupied, it will take more than the four score you mean to bring them to us."

"That is why we asked Neighbor to lead us," Tomas said with a smile, "and Pory."

"And that is why Pory is trying to convince Captain Kilbenny to stay in Carr Tindla through the storm and then to come with us," Elystan replied. "Let us hope that he agrees."

"And let us hope that he and his soldiers will not be needed," Tomas added sternly.

"Ah, Jilapene, how sad I am to see that the light is out of your eyes."

The melodic voice from above did not trouble Pory. For the last suspected that Belton's Jilapene was about. She had chosen to come to that formation of Carr Tindla because it offered her a view of the distant Kingdom's encampment and also with some hope of finding the elf, for Jilapene had been away for several days, sending the mountain souls. This morning, after Pory had crossed Carr Tindla, a group of Palmaria garrison soldiers had ridden down the road just before the second quarry through the shadows under the trees. The riders had already come from the village, the mountain, and they were headed straight for the Kingdom's camp.

"How long will clouds fill your eyes?" Jilapene asked, frowning his steady mountain wings to settle as a branch at his eye level. "When will you let the sun sparkle in these again, that those around you might glow in the reflection?"

"I was thinking about my family," Pory replied. "When I lost my mother and father in Dwindle, I lost all memories and thoughts of them for years. I would not have that happen to my memories of Carril and Pordwin."

"But you were young then," and Jilapene, to offer some hope to the beleaguered woman. "Too young to comprehend such tragedy, and so you let the tragedy pass out of your thoughts. Too young."

"Perhaps I am."

"But... the elf started to protest, but he saw that Pory didn't blink, just kept looking steadily toward the Kingdom's encampment. How sad for this young woman, who had lived for only a quarter of a century, to have lost two beloved people in her own lifetime. Jilapene knew that her beautiful face would never brighten again.

"Tell me of the soldiers who rode in this storm," Pory said the elf suddenly.

"Palmaria garrison," Jilapene replied, "riding hard. I shadowed them and hoped to hear to their conversation, but they did not stop to slow, and I heard not a single exchange of words."

Pory drew her lip, noting at the distant encampment and Jilapene understood his concern. Had these soldiers come to tell the Kingdom that the elf and Pory were out there?

"Baron Beldborough is a friend," Jilapene reminded her. "You loose and sword are proof enough of this, even if you doubt Roger's judgment."

"I do not," Pory was quick to reply. Jilapene's point, her home, Baron Beldborough was no friend of the Almaria Church, certainly. And Beldborough had shown great faith in Roger by giving him Geyrman and Defender, the horse and sword Roger had passed on to Pory.

"These soldiers are for the Barren, not the Church," Jilapene went on. "And with Baron Beldborough now understanding that it was a man of the Church who murdered his beloved nephew—apparently with the blessings, even orders, of the Church hierarchy—he'll not take their side against you and Elystan. No matter the promises of the Almaria Church leaders or the promises from the King of Hono-the-Bear."

"Agreed," said Pory, and the named to signal the elf. "But did you get a good look at the riders? Might Roger have been with them?"

"Only soldiers," Jilapene assured her, and he did not miss the cloud that passed over her face. "It is possible that Roger has not yet returned to Palmaria from Urd."

"I only hoped," Pony replied.

"You live for him? He is in the company of a powerful man," Jarrell pointed out. "Is he? They had been informed that Rager had gone to Uval with Baron Bildechoough to speak with King Dandale about Uval himself. "You on the western side of the Mesa Delaford north of Uval would be much power and influence as Baron Bildechoough."

"Except perhaps for the new abbot of St. Piousness."

"But his power is just that," Jarrell replied, "new, Baron Bildechoough holds the supreme position, for he has been entrusted in Piousness for many years, the best in a long line of leaders. So Rager should be safe enough."

The argument made sense to Pony, and her expression showed some relief.

"It will you want Rager back with us?" the elf continued.

Pony nodded.

"You wish him to accompany the caravan to Dandale's," said Jarrell, for he had some suspicions about Pony's intentions. Like all the Tread elves, Bellhairs Jarrell was blessed with the ability to see back and study a situation, to observe and to learn, and then to reason things through.

"Rager is a valuable ally I fear for his safety and power that he would be with Elbeyra, until he has learned more about the designs of the wild world," Pony said firmly.

Her words were spoken calmly but perceptive Jarrell did not miss that Pony's deep-seated resentment of the Church that had evolved into absolute hatred. "With Elbeyra?" he pressed. "With both of you, you mean?" Pony gave a noncommittal shrug, and that halfhearted answer only reinforced the elf's belief that she did not mean to go north with the caravan. He let the silence linger for a long while, let Pony alone with her thoughts as the wind in the distant mountains.

"I should go to Captain Kileynsey," she said finally.

"Perhaps he has been recalled to Piousness," Jarrell offered. "There are few matters about," he added when she looked puzzled. "A force is strong, at his might better serve the King in other regions."

"There is one troublesome group of powers in the west that he wishes to destroy before he comes south," and Pony. "And, for Elbeyra, I will soon ask Captain Kileynsey to spend the winter in Can Tialia and then accompany the caravan to Dandale's."

"Indeed," said the elf. "And will Jolepouse also accompany the caravan?"

His blunt question hit her hard, and she did not reply for several seconds.

"Of course, Elbeyra, thanks you will go," Jarrell offered, "as does Tessa Gaggery. I heard him say so much."

"Then why would you ask?"

"Because I do not believe that you intend to make the journey," Jarrell explained. "Your eyes are turned southward. Will you not return to your home?"

Pony was caught and she knew it she even subconsciously glanced south again. "Of course I intend to return to Dandale's," she said. "If that is where Elbeyra goes, then it is my place."

"And you have no other place you wish to visit?"

"Do not visit my world," she stated. "If I choose to live, else where, then do not doubt that Elbeyra will follow me."

"And what do you choose?"

Again came the shrug. "I will return to Dandale's, but not with the caravan," Pony admitted.

Even though he had suspected as much all along, the proclamation stunned Jarrell.

"I will return to Piousness for a time," Pony went on. "I wish to look in on Belian O'Connolly and see how he fares with Fellowship Way."

"But you will have the time to go to Piousness and see Belian, and then return before the caravan departs," Jarrell reasoned.

"I have had enough of the northland and the fighting for now," came Pony's demure answer.

"That may be half true," the elf replied. Pony looked at him, and saw he was wearing a knowing smile. "You believe that your fight has just begun. The Father Abbot of the Abbotical Church has waged war on the laws of Jolepouse, and now the means to take the war to him."

"I could not begin," she started to reply.

"No, you could not," she elf interrupted. "Do you intend to travel

back to St. Anne-Abbot to wage war against nearly a thousand hard-trained and magic-wielding monks? Or will you attack St. Piousness and then return, who, according to Master Jolepouse, is the least warrior east to venture forth from St. Anne-Abbot? And what of Elbeyra, the elf priestess, following Pony then, for she started to walk away. "How will he feel when he learns that you deserted him, that you could not trust it is so join this cause you have chosen for yourself?"

"Enough!" Pony snapped, springing to face him. "I am not deserting Elbeyra."

"If you go to wage war properly, then you are."

"You know nothing about it."

"Then tell me!" The simple manner in which Jarrell spoke calmed Pony considerably, reminding her that the elf was a friend, a true friend, to be trusted.

"I do not go south to wage war," she explained, "though do not doubt that I intend to repay the Abbotical Church for the pain it has brought me."

A dozen times Jarrell's eyes, he had never heard Pony sound so cold before and he did not like it, not one bit.

"But that will wait," Pony went on. "Dandale is the primary issue for Elbeyra and for Rager, if he ever returns to us. And I know that we all must now to discuss what happened during those Bildechoough's meeting with the King. Perhaps my work with the Church will not be so private after all."

"Then why do you look south?" Jarrell asked quietly.

"On the road to St. Anne-Abbot, when I thought we would meet a dark end and that once all of it would be resolved, I understood Elbeyra."

"You are husband and wife, after all," she elf replied with a grin.

"We had made a part of destiny," Pony explained, "for we feared."

"You are with child," Jarrell realized, his golden eyes opening wide.

Pony, neither with words nor expression, denied it.

"But perhaps you are wrong," Jarrell offered. "That was but a few weeks ago."

"I know the morning after we made love," Pony assured him. "I know not if it is my work with the priestesses, the soul stone is a paradox, or perhaps it is merely the miracle of life itself, but I know And all that has happened or more potentially, not happened in the ensuing weeks has chosen that I am with child. Bellhairs Jarrell."

Jarrell's smile widened all the more to be considered the potential for this child, born of such parents. That smile disappeared though when Jarrell looked up at Jarrell's face.

"You should be joyful," he said to her. "This is an occasion for celebration and not for sorrow."

"The war is not nearly as it is ended," Pony said. "Dandale has yet to be reclaimed."

"A minor issue," she elf replied. "And forget your wars, Jolepouse Wyndon. Consider that which is within you the most important matter for you and Elbeyra."

Pony did marriage a while in the name Jolepouse Wyndon, the first time Jarrell had ever called her that. "You'll not tell Elbeyra," she said. "Not about my plan to go south, and not about my... my child."

"He has a right to know," Jarrell started to protest.

"And so he shall know by my words and not yours."

Jarrell dipped a respectful bow.

"I will go to Captain Kileynsey," Pony explained. "Let us see what these new soldiers have come about." She walked past him, and the elf fell in behind her, to shadow her movements from the house. If they were wrong about the new soldiers, if these riders had come north in search of two outlaws, then Jarrell would stand beside his friend.

The elf spent a long time considering that notion, his friend. What would Lady Dandale-leader of the Tread'elias and the others of Can'el'el' think if they understood the depth of that truth within Bellhairs Jarrell's heart? Other elves had befriended Nighelard during his stay in the elven valley, and Tiaman had become close to the man, and so Jolepouse. But always before when Jarrell decided to go to Mount Ada with the companions to battle the demon daryl and when afterward the elf chose to lead human refugees to the elven valley when Dandale allowed those painful humans that that secret elven place, even when Tiaman chose to follow the experience to Ada and ultimately to sacrifice her life-the elven chosen had been made out of partnership and

the prospect for gain in the drive. Now, though, if Elbryan and Paine were to be engaged in a battle, it would be a fight between business, a fight that had nothing to do with the good of the alien folk, and Jurend's participation in the matter would not change the outcome.

Yet he would fight with his friends and die with his friends, if that came to pass. Indeed, the elf's chance to go to St-Mon-Alelie to help rescue Rishwarden and Jlopomane's widow pained him had been based wholly in friendship.

Lady Daiselwood would not approve, Jurend knew, for the conflict between his friends and the Church was one that must be decided by the lawmen. Jurend's actions then and now were not in accord with the general sense of alien society, which placed the good of the drive above all, balancing the life of a single elf worth far more than those of a thousand of another race—even humans, whom the elves did not dislike.

But Jurend would follow Paine now, and if a fight came, he would stand and die beside his friend.

As soon as Elbryan left Toren-he, discussion ended by the murals as the Palmaris soldiers rumbled through Carr Tindia on their way to find the Kingmen. He started straight off to find Symphony and rode for the camp. Like Paine, he feared that the arrival of these soldiers might have something to do with the gnomes and the escape of the imprisoned centaur from St-Mon-Alelie. Also, he assumed Paine was already meeting with Captain Kilmoney. The ranger brushed a bee away as he sat at the camp's perimeter and saw no sign of explosive magic if they were there and the soldiers had tried to take him, but he judged that magic would likely have leveled half the camp anyway.

"Greetings, Nightbird!" a voice called. Another soldier moved to take Symphony's horse, but the ranger waved him away.

"New arrivals?" he asked.

"Palmaris parsons," the soldier explained. "They are in discussion with Captain Kilmoney."

"And with Jlopomane?"

"To be sure, she has not yet arrived," the soldier replied.

Elbryan directed Symphony into the encampment and was greeted warmly by all he encountered, men and women whose respect he had earned in the last couple of weeks, in the few battles the group had fought against savage bands of marauders. Captain Kilmoney's soldiers had been glad to have Nightbird and Jlopomane by their side when the fighting began. The rangers, in turn, had come to know and respect those soldiers, if the new arrivals had as one with malicious intent to snatch of him and Paine, the word had not yet spread.

The ranger's relief faded when he descended and entered Captain Kilmoney's tent. So grave were the expressions of Kilmoney and the others that Elbryan's hand went to the hilt of his sword.

"What news?" the ranger asked after a tense moment.

Kilmoney eyed him squarely. The captain was taller than Elbryan by two inches, and was mildly built, though nowhere near as heavily muscled as the powerful ranger. His nearly ironed head and mustache were strikingly red, as was his heavy hair, and all that added contrast to his naturally blue eyes, that now showed a profound sadness and anger to perceive Elbryan.

Shamus Kilmoney looked to the leader of the Palmaris emigrants, and the ranger tensed, almost expecting an attack. "What news?" Elbryan demanded again.

"Who is this man?" asked the leader of the Palmaris parsons, a solidly built woman, nearest to six feet in height, though no five, with hair as fiery red as Kilmoney's hanging in thick locks. Her eyes, like the captain's, were sparkling blue. It seemed to Elbryan that these two might even be siblings—except that her accent was closer to the rural dialect, typical of the wilderness, while Shamus Kilmoney's diction and enunciation were perfect.

"He is an ally," Kilmoney explained, "serving is soon for my partner."

"A more sense?" the woman remarked, and she turned her eyebrows as she considered the powerful ranger. Elbryan saw his suspicions echoed there and also a bit of curiosity.

"His accomplishments are too many for me even to begin to list these ones," Kilmoney said impatiently.

The woman nodded.

"Baron Rochester Billeborough is dead," Kilmoney bluntly explained.

Elbryan's green eyes went wide. His first thought was for Rogo, whom he knew was working with Billeborough.

"The girl murdered on the road just west of Palmaris," the woman

explained, her voice rising a bit determined and hiding great pain. Elbryan realized, "They're my!" but carriage was crushed by some beast, a great one most likely."

"On his way back from Urul?" the ranger asked.

"On his way to Urul," the woman corrected.

"But that was months ago," the ranger protested. What he was thinking was that, if the woman's words were true, he and Paine had passed through Palmaris after the murder and yet had heard nothing of it.

"We didn't think to make the trip much a priority," the woman said dryly, "bigger soldiers to tell than Captain Shamus Kilmoney and his dirty friend."

"What of his companions?" the ranger asked, ignoring the words and accepting the woman's explanation for the lack of communication.

"All killed," the woman replied.

Elbryan's cheeks whitened.

"They'd be there, camp," another soldier offered. "Seems they were caught somewhere. The Baron tried to get back into his carriage, but she cut his leg off and sent him up."

From the few words the soldier had offered, Elbryan had great doubts concerning the nature of this beast. In his years with the Knut-falls, he had been taught the ways of animals, human and human. There were great cat about, though very few ranked in the twisted lands between Palmaris and Urul. But such creatures would not normally attack and slaughter a group of men. A hunting cat might take a lone person for food, might even stay with its victim and help it fly off in when who tried to take the prey from it, but the telling clue here was the pursuit of the Baron into his carriage.

"I seen a mark," another soldier offered. "All of 'em, some up and lying in a pond of blood."

"And who was killed first?" the ranger asked.

"Had to be one of the guards at the fire," the man replied. "One seen even get his weapon up above the car ripped him dead, and the others got no chance to see any defense."

"So the Baron was the last killed in his carriage?"

The man nodded, his lips tight, as if he were chewing back pain. It made little sense to Elbryan, unless some disaster occurred and he attacked or unless a group of cats on unlikely occurrence had come to together.

"How many were there?" he asked the women.

"They was all ripped," the man said. "That puts you spelled out. One of 'em had his head lying open on his chest. I'm not for knowing how many have the cat took of each."

"And yet, thinkin' this so be needed?" the woman presented to Captain Kilmoney.

Kilmoney raised a placid look upon Elbryan, but the ranger had his hand up, signaling that he would not pass the next burden. He didn't need so. No hungry cat would have a moment as a hunt unseen, and no cat would spend the energy killing fleeing people when there was a fresh kill to be eaten. If the man's description of the scene was accurate, then the Baron had not been killed by any natural beast.

And of course that had Elbryan to even more daunting thoughts. He had seen the gnomes in work many times, had spoken with Avelin about them at length, and knew of one that could transform a man's arm into an animal's paw.

"The man about the Baron," the ranger began calmly. "Did you know them all?"

"One was a friend," the woman replied. "And I seen the others with him before. The Baron's down guard, they were?"

The ranger nodded. "I have heard that another one a soldier was working with Baron Billeborough."

"The little fellow," the woman remarked. "Yeah, we heard of him."

"And was his body at the camp?"

"Didn't see 'em," the woman replied.

That gave Elbryan a bit of relief but didn't result in anything. The cat, if it was a cat, might have dragged Rogo away to eat. Even more plausibly, the mark, if it was a mark, might have taken Rogo prisoner, seeking information about Elbryan and Paine.

"What is your concern?" he asked the Palmaris leader.

"We come right to tell Captain Kilmoney if the Baron, in nature, have been sent in every direction," she replied.

"The death of the Baron holds tremendous implications for Palmaris," Shamus Kilmoney remarked, "especially following so closely on the

murder of Abbot DeLemonson."

"The cap'n been to brew all the season," the woman added. "The new abbot's just arrived from another trip to St. Mary-Abelle some College of Abbot, whenever that might be meant—and now he's taken his place, and a bit more than that, but he's not without his merits."

The ranger nodded, hearing the words as confirmation of her word from him. He had never met the new abbot of St. Precious-only briefly but long enough to recognize that DeLemonson was an amiable man, full of fire and good. Blidhewson's death left a gaping hole in the power structure of his only town. Common was dead, so was Abbot DeLemonson, but Abbot DeLemonson would never fill. And the fact that DeLemonson had gone back to St. Mary-Abelle for the college made the ranger fear the Abbot might have had a previous Ranger. Lookless, in awe.

It seemed to Elbryan then that the Abbot's Church was a good black woman, rising in black out the sun. He considered his journey to Abbot to handle the duty and his trip to St. Mary-Abelle to end his travels from the clutches of the Father Abbot, and he understood that those two missions had not been so very different-out at all.

"And what cause for just?" Elbryan asked Kilmoney.  
The man blew a helpless sigh. "I should return to Palmaria," he said, "to see if I can help secure the city."

"You are needed here," the ranger reminded. "Wines may enter harder than these folk, and bring in monsters that they cannot overcome without your help. And then there is the matter of the caravan north, before the sun of spring."

"We're not far from the mountains of the Fairlands in the territory of Palmaria," the woman protested incredulously, moving closer to the captain and looking him with an intense gaze-one that reflected familiarity. Elbryan noted, thinking again that there might be a family relation here.

The ranger looked at Kilmoney, but the captain only shrugged, defeated by the simple logic of the woman's statement.

"What of the power based to the west?" the ranger asked, for he and Kilmoney had previously discussed their plans concerning one troublesome band of bloody-eyed thieves who had not left the region, looting at a distance to any who might venture outside the secure area of Carr Tindia and Lashdown.

"We will deal with them as soon," Shamus Kilmoney offered. The woman's words began to pour.

"And then, if the weather holds and leaves the road clear, my men and I will care to the south," Shamus said in a tone that left no room for debate.

The woman gasped and turned away in awe, scarcely in the ranger's grasp.

"I give you Nightbird," Captain Kilmoney said, finally introducing him.

The ranger lifted his chin slightly but did not bow.

"Nightbird?" the woman asked, her expression one of a strange awe.

"And this a Sergeant Colleen Kilmoney of the Palmaria guard," Shamus explained.

"You mean?" the ranger asked.

"Course," replied Shamus, somewhat dismissively.

"From the better part of the family," Colleen was quick to put in, and Elbryan couldn't tell if his tone was serious or not. "Oh, we usually learned to speak so proper and pretty for certain ladies in Usal. He's even been to the King's dinner table."

Shamus glowered at her, but the girl gave a defiant laugh and turned to the ranger.

"Well, Master Nightbird," she began.

"Just Nightbird," the ranger explained.

"Well, Master Nightbird," Colleen went on without missing a beat, "some year you go fight with the bloody cap'n. We and the soldiers'll go along for the fun. We'll all be installed by the happenings in Palmaria, and it might be good for us to take out our warts on the powers."

The other two Palmaria soldiers, grim-faced, nodded.

Shamus Kilmoney said, "We have not much time. The battlefield must be chosen and prepared."

"To make your own battlefield when you draw your sword," another Colleen put in.

Elbryan eyed the captain and then his cousin. There was an intense smoky haze, obviously, and the ranger understood that such feelings could lead to disaster in a fight. "I will leave where the powers have gone and choose the appropriate ground for our attack," he said, and he walked from the tent.

"We're a bit small," he heard Colleen complain.

"None can prepare a battlefield better than Nightbird," Shamus was saying to Elbryan, shaking his head and smiling, murmured sympathy and started

away. His conversation over Colleen Kilmoney was short-lived, though, leaving only as long as it took him to consider again the guess news the woman had delivered.

He found Elbryan waiting the campfires even as he was leaving it, and he smiled sympathy over to her.

She eyed him suspiciously, and she knew even before he began to speak that something was wrong.

"Barns Blidhewson was murdered on the road, before he even got near Usal," Elbryan said, sliding down to stand beside his wife, "along with all his guard-though no sign of Rogers was discovered among the dead."

"Whereas again?" came Jarroff's voice from the tent, dripping with concern.

"Same day this killed Abbot DeLemonson, no doubt."

"That thought may hold more truth than you believe," the ranger replied. "Those who found the bones say he was killed by a great cat, but while the wounds might pose concerns with such a creature, I doubt the matter will."

"Tigers pass," Pery said, referring to the possibility the monks could see in commonness that little was those of a great cat. She closed her eyes and put her head down, sighing deeply, and Elbryan draped his arm around her shoulders, meaning that he needed the support. Every new encounter as word about the Abbot's Church weighed heavily on Pery; every action those monks engaged in that was so wholly, as against the principles that had guided dear Arlyle, only reinforced her grief for his lost parent.

"Palmaria is in turmoil," Elbryan said, speaking more to Jarroff.

"Our time with Captain Kilmoney and his soldiers grows short. We should dispatch that power hand before we depart."

"And what of Rogers?" Pery was quick to ask. "Are we to continue our duties here, even go further away, while he might be in a terrible post?"

Elbryan held his hands out helplessly. "There was no sign of Rogers among the dead as anywhere on the road," he explained.

"He may have been taken," Jarroff offered.

"If he has been sent to St. Mary-Abelle, I will go back," Pery declared, but none so cold that a new shadow through Elbryan, the suspicion that the means to go in through the forest down this time, and leave little standing in his wake.

"And if he has been taken, then of course we will go for him," Elbryan assured her. "But we do not know that, and in the absence of evidence, we must hold our time in Pery and continue our planned course."

"But if we continue in the north, or go again the power here will we discover Rogers' fate?" Pery pressed.

It was a dilemma, but the ranger remained unconvinced that they should drop everything and go in search of Rogers Lookless. The man was a survivor. When Elbryan and Jarroff had gone near Barre-occupied Carr Tindia to rescue him, they had found him already free. "I have no answer," the ranger admitted. "I know that I must trust Rogers. If he was killed on the road, then there is nothing I can do about it."

"You would not average a found?" Pery's words cut deep.

Elbryan stared at her as if he were a stranger, some different person than the one he had come to love so deeply.

Pery couldn't match that stare. She lowered her head and sighed again.

"Of course you would," she admitted. "I am afraid for Rogers, that is all."

"We can send word to Belton or Comely in Palmaria," Jarroff offered.

"The city is too large for us to go wandering about in its streets in local Rogers. But Belton, so centered in the town, might be able to glean some information."

"All groups flee through Fellowship Way," Pery added helpfully.

"I will go to Yonaz Gargewent," Elbryan offered, "and secure a cross of course."

"None would prove more trustworthy than I," Pery said in the ranger took a step away.

Elbryan stepped in his tracks and closed his eyes; it took a long while for him to secure control of his anger. Then he moved to her slowly, assented that she would take such a step.

"I must go and meet with Blackbeard," Jarroff reminded. "We will wait out the powers and report this evening." And the elf was gone, leaving the two, who had hardly heard his words, to their conversation.

This excerpt is from the third book in the series "Demon Wars," following the successful "The Demon Awakened" and "The Demon Spies." To be published in its entirety by Del Rey in March 1999.